



On the Explanation of Dreams (Somniale Ioseph) | Ad explanandum sompniū

Text Information

Author | Anonymous

Language | Latin

Period | 13th Century

Genre | Handbooks and manuals

Source | Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, MS Ham. 390 f.49v

Collection | Prayer, Spirituality, and Life after Death: Global Medieval Perspectives

URL | sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/explanation_dreams/

Translation by Danny Smith.

Introduction to the Text

This short text is one of many so-called "dreambooks"—personal guides to dream interpretation—that flourished across Europe and Byzantium in the late Middle Ages. This particular example is a mantic alphabet known as a *Somniale Ioseph*, named for Joseph, the Old Testament dream interpreter. Like a similar mantic alphabet contained in the same manuscript and also published on the *Global Medieval Sourcebook*, it is designed to be used alongside another text. A dreamer opens a book, often a psalter or prayer book, at random and stops at the first letter that they see. Turning back to the *Somniale Ioseph*, then, the dreamer reads the entry corresponding to that letter.

This text differs from other kinds of alphabetical dreambooks, such as the tradition known as *Somniale Danielis*, which listed themes and images from dreams alongside interpretations. This text instead introduces a note of chance, drawing on the long history of bibliomancy (fortune-telling with books) in the Middle Ages.

Dream interpretation was a popular pastime in the Middle Ages and hundreds of manuscript copies of dreambooks, drawn from Arabic, Byzantine, Greek, and Hebrew sources, survive alongside those written in Latin and vernacular European languages.

Introduction to the Source

Eighty-eight similar *Somniale Ioseph* texts survive in manuscript editions, most from the fifteenth century. This particular copy was written in the thirteenth century in Venice or the Veneto and is preserved in Berlin in Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, MS Ham. 390 f.49v, alongside another mantic alphabet published on the *Global Medieval Sourcebook*, as well as other divinatory and oracular texts. Below the alphabet on the page an illustrator has included a kind of diagram of how the dreambook functions. A small figure is shown asleep and dreaming (labeled *iste dormit*) and then is shown sitting awake before a group of friends as he excitedly explains his dream with the help of a book open on his lap (labeled *hic splanat somnia*).

Further Reading

Chardonens, László Sándor. "Dream Divination in Manuscripts and Early Printed Books: Patterns of Transmission." In *Aspects of Knowledge: Preserving and Reinventing Traditions of Learning in the Middle Ages*, edited by Marilina Cesario and Hugh Magennis, 23-52. Manchester Medieval Literature and Culture. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018.

- *The most recent study of transmission and translation of Somniale Ioseph and Somnia Danielis texts in the West.*

Chardonens, László Sándor. "Handlist of Dream Divination and Lunar Prognostication in Western Manuscripts and Early Printed Books up to 1550." Accessed July 22, 2020. https://www.academia.edu/29720263/Handlist_of_Dream_Divination_and_Lunar_Prognostication_in_Western_Manuscripts_and_Early_Printed_Books_up_to_1550.

- *A continuously updated list of surviving manuscript and print witnesses.*

Kruger, Steven F. *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

- *Particular Chapter 1 - "Dreambooks and the Audiences"*

Thorndike, Lynn. *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*. Vol. 2. New York: Macmillan, 1923, pp 290-302.

- *The earliest modern survey in English of dreambook texts.*



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| ¶ In .A. significat adiutorium domini. | ¶ An .A. signifies the help of the Lord. |
| ¶ In .B. significat aliquod bonum. | ¶ A .B. signifies something good. |
| ¶ In .C. significat sanguinem. | ¶ A .C. signifies blood. |
| ¶ In .D. significat inimicum. | ¶ A .D. signifies an enemy. |
| ¶ In .E. significat noua uidere uel audire. | 5 ¶ An .E. signifies hearing or seeing strange things. |
| ¶ In .F. significat malum prope esse. | ¶ An .F. signifies that evil is near. |
| ¶ In .G. significat gaudium. | ¶ A .G. signifies delight. |
| ¶ In .H. significat ad esse gaudium. | ¶ An .H. signifies a coming delighted. |
| ¶ In .I. significat alibi ire. | ¶ An .I. signifies going somewhere. |
| ¶ In .K. significat in eodem loco stare. | 10 ¶ A .K. signifies staying put. |
| ¶ In .L. significat leticiam ed esse. | ¶ An .L. signifies being happy. |
| ¶ In .M. significat aliquod magnum. | ¶ An .M. signifies something large. |
| ¶ In .N. significat aloquod contrarium. | ¶ An .N. signifies something conflicting. |
| ¶ In .O. significat elemosinam facere. | ¶ An .O. signifies giving alms. |
| ¶ In .P. significat pietatem exercere. | 15 ¶ A .P. signifies working dutifully. |
| ¶ In .Q. significat ad deum curere. | ¶ A .Q. signifies attending to God. |
| ¶ In .R. significat fossa mortis. | ¶ An .R. signifies grave peril. |
| ¶ In .S. significat salutem domini. | ¶ An .S. signifies deliverance by the Lord. |
| ¶ In .T. significat tristiciam ad esse. | ¶ A .T. signifies being sad. |
| ¶ In .V. Significat uenire adorare. | 20 ¶ A .V. signifies coming to worship. |
| ¶ In .X. significat saluatorem ad esse. | ¶ An .X. signifies the coming of the savior. |
| ¶ In .Y. significat id adiuuare. | ¶ A .Y. signifies His aid. |
| ¶ In .Ç. significat mortem adesse. | ¶ A .Ç. Signifies a coming death. |

Critical Notes

Line 22 This refers to divine aid.