

· CHAPTER 1 ·

Macrobius: *Commentarius ex Cicerone
in Somnium Scipionis*¹

Paper by W. Bächtold

Mr. Bächtold: Macrobius lived around AD 400. He was a Neoplatonist in Rome who wrote in support of pagan antiquity. Besides his commentary on Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*, to be discussed here, his works are the *Saturnalia* and contributions to grammar.

The text of Scipio's dream in Cicero's *De re publica* is extant only in the work of Macrobius, and has been reconstructed from that source. The dreamer is Scipio Africanus Junior (*Africanus Minor*). He lived from 185 to 129 BC, dying at fifty-six (= eight times seven years, which will be important later on). By adoption he became the grandson of Scipio (*Africanus Maior*). In 146 he conquered Carthage, and in 133 Numantia. He was killed in 129 BC.

Scipio visited Africa together with his invited friend Masinissa. They discussed Scipio Senior (*Africanus Maior*), who had defeated Hannibal. The following night he dreamed:

[Abbreviated summary] Africanus Maior—his spiritual father—appears to him and prophesies that he, the son, would destroy Carthage in two years. At first he would be sent to various countries as a legate, then become consul, and finally dictator and restorer of the state. He would

¹ Ambrosius Aurelius Theodosius Macrobius, *In Somnium Scipionis*. As in *Macrobe, Varron et Pomponius Méla* (Latin and French), trans. D. Nisard, ed. M. Nisard (1850; Paris: Dubochet, Le Chevalier, and Garnier, 1883) (G).

For an English translation since the 1930s, see William Harris Stahl, trans. and introduction, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio by Macrobius* (1952; New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

achieve pre-eminence, provided that his relatives did not kill him beforehand. Then he is told that those who had distinguished themselves by their virtues [virtutes] would live on after death. At that point young Scipio professes his wish to die. His father warns him that he is not allowed to do, for that would arrogate a right reserved to the gods. His father then reveals heaven with its nine spheres, and then the earth, divided into several zones. Finally, his father reveals to him the immortality and divinity of the soul, declaring, “deum te esse scitare.”²

This dream was recorded by Cicero, and Macrobius wrote a long commentary on it. Chapters 1 and 2 of his contribution contain the introduction and philosophical disputations; in the third chapter he presents a classification of dreams into five categories:

1. *somnium*: dreams proper
2. *visio*: vision (*la vision*)
3. *oraculum*: oracle (*l'oracle*)
4. *insomnium*: (*le rêve*) [dream image, insomnia]
5. *visum*: phantasm, phantasmagoria (*le spectre*) [dream vision, apparition]

According to Macrobius, the last two categories are not worthy of explanation, because they contain nothing divine (*divinatio*): in the *insomnium* we experience the same as in waking daily life, the same hardships and labors. These dreams are about our love, our enemies, about food, money, or prestige, in the sense that sometimes we win them, sometimes we lose them. The *insomnium* is gone with the night, lacks meaning and significance, and in no way can we profit from it. The *visum* appears when we are neither asleep nor awake, but still in a semi-

²The Latin text is inexact, for *deum te igitur scito esse* (Know therefore that you are god [or, (a) god (within)]). See Cicero, *De Re Publica* bk.VI.26, and cf. below, 11. In his edition of Cicero's text, James Zetzel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 250) says, “Cicero's emphatic statement of the distinction between mortal body and immortal soul, and of the identification of the person with the soul rather than the body (or the combined soul and body) is Platonic (cf. especially *Phaedrus* 115c–e and *Laws* 12.959ab.)” Cicero restates his point, referring to this part of *On the Republic*, in his *Tusculan Disputations* I.xxii.53: “But if the soul turns out not to know the nature of the soul itself, tell me, please, will it ever know that it exists, not even know that it moves? This is the basis of Plato's argument expounded by Socrates in the *Phaedrus* (A. E. Douglas, ed. and trans. [Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1985]).

conscious state. Fantasy figures appear that cannot be found in nature. They dance around us, sometimes instilling joy, sometimes sadness. People believe that stomachache in sleep is caused by these creatures. So these two kinds of dreams cannot help us read the future.

This case is different with the other three kinds. The *oracle* presents itself as follows: an honorable, important person appears (father, mother, priest, deity) and enlightens us about what we ought or ought not to do, what is or is not going to happen. The *vision* is a look into the future. We dream of something that will happen shortly afterward, for instance, of a friend who will visit us. The *dream proper* (*somnium*) invariably expresses itself, according to Macrobius, figuratively (symbolically), and in such a confusing way that we have to interpret it. This dream proper is divided into five subcategories:

- a. *proprium*: about the dreamer himself, in an active or passive role
- b. *alienum*: about another person
- c. *commune*: the common experience of a group in the dream
- d. *publicum*: about a community: city, square, theater, etc.
- e. *generale*: the universe (heaven, stars, earth) speaks to the dreamer to tell him something new.

In Scipio's dream, we can find the first three categories and all five subcategories: (1.) the oracle (his grandfather Africanus explains the future to him); (2.) the vision (he sees the place where he will live after his death); (3.) the dream (without interpretation it is impossible to understand what he has been told). The five subcategories can be found as follows in the dream: (a) *proprium* (he, Scipio, is led to the higher regions); (b) *alienum* (he sees other souls in the realm of the dead); (c) *commune* (what he sees also relates to him, because after his death he will have the same experience); (d) *publicum* (dealing with Rome's victory over Carthage); (e) *generale* (he sees movements in the heavens and hears the music of the spheres).

How is it that Scipio has such a "great dream," being still a simple soldier at that moment? The general view was that such dreams were dreamed only by the "*magistratus et rector rei publicae*."³ The answer to

³Latin: the leader and ruler of the community or state.

this question therefore would be: because Scipio is *initiated* into the secrets of nature, excels in manly bravery and virtues (*virtutes*), and distinguishes himself by worldly wisdom.

Virgil speaks of the two gates of the underworld, through which dreams come, one made of ivory, the other of horn. According to Virgil, *true* dreams come from the gate of horn alone. Porphyry⁴ explains this as follows: “Truth hides; however, the soul can sometimes see it when the body has gone to sleep and gives the soul more freedom. The rays of the deity reach our eye only in a refracted way, as if the light were shining through horn.”

In the fourth chapter of the book, on the goal and intent of the dream, Macrobius tells us that deserving souls return to heaven and enjoy eternal blessedness, which is worth more than any worldly fame.

And now, unbelievable as it may be to our eyes, Macrobius begins interpreting the dream in exactly the same way that we do in our seminar. He examines one part of the dream after the other, looking for parallels in mythology. In particular he draws on *Orphic*, *Pythagorean*, and *Platonic* teachings.

I would like to treat this method in greater detail, as we must follow the same procedure in the interpretation of a dream. As we know, dreams often express themselves in symbolic language, give no more than allusions, or are incomplete. Ideas appear, or better, images, which at first have no meaning for us at all. We have to enrich these images, infuse them with meaning, give them content. Of course this should not be done arbitrarily, but according to a very specific method. We have to enrich the dream with ideas, submit it to comparison. Hence we could speak of an amplifying and comparative method.

An analogy exists in comparative anatomy. An animal’s organ seems unintelligible from a purely morphological point of view, but as soon as we view it with the help of comparative anatomy, that organ is seen in context and is full of meaning. We draw on several ancillary sciences, such as embryology, paleontology, etc. In a similar way, we also use ancillary arts, such as the mythologies of all peoples and countries, sagas and folktales, religions, and history. In these fields we are looking for parallels to a given motif. And we find them; further connections and explanations often emerge, accounting for why something is one way or the other.

⁴Porphyry (ca. 232–ca. 304), Greek Neoplatonist.

Perhaps it was even easier for Macrobius than for us. As a man of antiquity, for him mythological concepts were much more alive. He drew on the whole body of Pythagorean, Orphic, and Platonic teachings and cosmology for his commentary, proceeding quite comprehensively, so that here it is impossible to give an account of everything. I must limit myself to the most interesting points.

Macrobius selects various dream passages that deserve special attention. He begins with the phrase in which Scipio Africanus Maior says to the younger man, verbatim:

For when your age will have completed eight times seven recurring rotations of the sun, and when these two numbers, each of which—although for different reasons—is considered to be full, will have completed, according to the natural rotation, that number of life years imposed on you, then the attention of the whole country will be directed toward you and your name, . . . etc. . . . if you escape the treacherous hands of your relatives (chapter 5).

Then follows a discussion of numbers in general, and of seven and eight in particular. When man lets his thoughts gradually rise from objects in nature toward divine phenomena, numbers are an intermediary stage between the actual phenomena and the divine. For bodies can change, due to their molecular composition, but numbers are quasi-eternal values, beyond becoming and passing away. Macrobius speaks of the *plenitudo*, the “fullness” of numbers. His train of thought is as follows: we have a body that has a certain number of areas and lines, and although the body is something material, in relation to it areas and lines are immaterial. This is even truer for numbers in relation to lines.

Professor Jung: We can see how precisely Macrobius is proceeding here, and one will either marvel at it or be bored stiff. But let us not forget that the book was written 1,500 years ago. Concepts then were not yet as precise as they are today; still, concepts had to be conceived, mostly in a very long-winded way. This is simply an aside about the interesting way in which human thinking has developed.

Mr. Bächtold: Among the numbers, the *number eight* is particularly *plenus*.⁵ It is composed of $4 + 4 = 2 + 2 + 2 + 2$. In addition, the eight has an extraordinary relation to heavenly harmony. Moreover, eight is composed of the prime number 7 and the monad 1. So we are dealing

⁵Latin: full, completed, strong, resonant, perfect.

with the Pythagorean number system here. Macrobius also says that for Pythagoreans eight is the symbol of *aequitas*, that is, equity, balance, etc.

Chapter 6 offers similar speculations about the number seven: $4 + 3 = 7$; $4 \times 7 = 28$. Humans have seven organs, etc.

In chapter 7 Macrobius discusses a significant afterthought: “if you escape the treacherous hands of your relatives.” In his opinion this is curious: why does the speaker not know for sure if it will happen or not? Disturbing prophecies are always ambiguous, but they contain correlations that can lead to the path of truth, if the interpretation is made wisely and perceptively. The dream alludes to what may happen, not what will. We can escape such a fate if we are prudent, but to accomplish it we need our mind and skill as antagonists in the effort. One can appease the gods by sacrifices, for instance.

We see from this passage that Macrobius interprets it in exactly the same way that we would. The dream shows *possibilities*; it is ambiguous with regard to the future. When we deal with dream interpretation, we will incline toward fatalism. Human freedom no longer seems to exist, because everything is predetermined anyway. But the dream is ambiguous and ambivalent with regard to the future. It shows possibilities, and we just might succeed in averting a threatening fate and “placate the gods” by intense devotion or conscious working through.

Let me remind you of the mountain climber’s dreams that Professor Jung once related. The dreamer made light of them and then indeed fell to his death.⁶ So we see that a dream can also warn us.

Furthermore, chapter 10 holds a certain interest. Scipio asks in the dream if his father and the dead in general are still living. Macrobius outlines the whole ancient view of the underworld and continued existence after death, in particular Platonic ideas: the body is the grave of the soul (Plato). I will give only a short sketch of the Platonic doctrine of the soul. Before birth the soul is a sphere,⁷ that is, it is still a unity because opposites do not yet exist. (We also find a parallel in the Chinese sphere.)



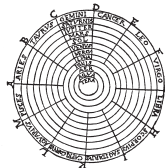
⁶Such a dream is told in C. G. Jung, CW 16, para. 323.

⁷Cf. *Children’s Dreams Seminar*, 38n16.

Then this sphere proceeds to birth, to incarnation. It then loses its spherical shape, that is, its unity. The soul wanders on the Milky Way from heaven to earth. The Milky Way intersects the astrological zodiac in Cancer and Capricorn, the two gates of the sun. The first gate, Cancer, is the gate of man, while the second gate, Capricorn, is the gate of the gods. Through the first gate souls descend to earth, through the second they return. Macrobius says about the Milky Way that milk is an infant's first food. According to Pythagoras it is the first step of descent, the first impulse toward earthly embodiment. As the sphere descends, the *monad* becomes a *dyad*. It enters into the world, the body, the forest, into *hyle* (substance, matter).⁸ According to Plato, it gets "drunk." In this drunken state the soul flows further downward and receives specific characteristics from each planet.

<i>Planets</i>	<i>Specific characteristics</i>
Saturn	reason, logic
Jupiter	energy
Mars	passion
Sun	feeling and phantasy
Venus	wishes and desires
Mercury	capability of expression
Moon	procreativity

These ideas are taken over by Macrobius and formulated with the help of the corresponding dream text of Scipio (cf. figure):



The first of these circles is the celestial circle (zodiac, fixed stars), which encompasses all the others, itself being the highest god. The eternal, rotating orbits of the stars are attached to it. Below are the seven circles (planetary orbits), which move backwards, in a direction opposite to the rotation of the heaven.

⁸*Hyle*, Greek for wood or forest, was Aristotle's term for matter or substance, as opposed to *eidos* (form).

(Then follows a list of the planets, starting with the farthest out: Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury, Moon.) All that is underneath this is mortal and transient, except for souls, the gods' gift to humankind. Everything above the moon is eternal. For earth's globe is immobile and the lowest of all. All matter is drawn toward it by its gravitational force.

The dream of Scipio tells the following about the soul:

For humans were created on condition of their being the guardians of the globe, which you see in the middle of this temple, and which is called earth. Man has been given a soul from those eternal fires that you call the heavenly bodies and stars. They are round and spherical, animated by divine spirits. They complete their circles, paths of marvelous velocity.

Macrobius remarks that Cicero uses the word *animus*⁹ in both the correct and incorrect senses, because *animus* is mind and reason (*mens*), and no one doubts that it is more divine than the *anima*.¹⁰ *Animus*, however, often means *anima*. On the one hand, we have a *mind*, *animus*, originating in those eternal fires we share with heaven and the stars; on the other hand, we have a *spirit*, *anima*, imprisoned in the body, cut off from the divine *mens*.

At the end of this discussion Macrobius summarizes the concept of the *soul* in different philosophers:

- Plato calls it "that which moves itself"
- Xenocrates "the self-moving number"
- Aristotle "entelechy," i.e., something carrying its purpose (its goal) within itself
- Pythagoras and Philolaus "harmony"
- Posidonius "idea"
- Asclepiades "concurrent exercitation of the five senses"
- Hippocrates "subtle pneuma that is distributed throughout the whole body"
- Heraclides Ponticus "light"
- Heraclitus "spark of the stellar essence"¹¹

⁹Latin: mind, intellect, soul, feelings, heart, spirit, courage, character, pride, air.

¹⁰Latin: wind, breathing, soul, life, heart. One should also note in this connection that Cicero's usage of *mens* may adopt a shift already made, in later Platonism, from *psyche* for soul to *mens*: see Zetzler, *De Re Publica*, by Cicero, 250.

¹¹*Scintilla stellaris essentiae*.

Zeno	“condensed spirit in the body” (a spirit concentrated in the body)
Democritus	“spirit between the atoms, so mobile that it penetrates every body”
Critolaus	“originating in the quintessence”
Hipparchus	“fire”
Anaximenes	“air”
Empedocles and Critias	“blood”
Parmenides	“originating in earth and fire”
Epicurus	“a kind of mixture of fire, air, and spirit.”

For all these philosophers, the soul is immaterial and immortal.

There follow further discussions based on the dream, about astrology, stars and fixed stars, the sun and its various names, and finally the harmony of the spheres and music.

Scipio contemplates suicide in the dream, because life would be only the “death of the soul,” but this is denied to him, because only the gods may free us from the earth. If we leave this life by suicide, we will not be purified, and our souls will float around the earth.

In the twelfth chapter of Book II, Scipio writes that he has heard a dream full of wisdom. First he is told the hour in which he will die through treachery. Thus he learns to despise transient life. To encourage him after this frightening message, he is shown that he will live after death as a wise and good citizen. When he wants to commit suicide, his natural father Paulus appears and prevents him. Thus his soul is temperate in hope and fear, but capable of divine contemplation.

Then Macrobius’s discourse reaches its climax, leading to the end of the treatise, where Scipio is told, “*Deum te esse citare*,”¹² that is, the soul is not only immortal but also a god. This is revealed to him only after he has discovered what is frail and mortal, having no part in divinity.

In summary, we can say that three important points are touched upon in Macrobius’s treatise:

- (1) The concept of different kinds of dreams and their meaning: this ancient classification continued through the Middle Ages, and even today our view is still really no different. As we know, the Middle Ages took over the whole philosophy and natural science of antiquity. But

¹² As noted above, on 4, Cicero’s text correctly reads, “*deum te igitur scito esse*” (know therefore that you are god).

while ancient scientific texts were subjected to a certain experimental verification at the beginning of modernity, “dream science” not only made no progress but also was even neglected and forgotten. In my view, it is now the task of our time to subject this neglected field to a thorough examination, because the neglected unconscious exercises a poisoning, destructive effect, with catastrophic effects on today’s politics and economy.

- (2) The method of dream interpretation in antiquity: today we use essentially the same method, as I have shown. Now, however, even more material is at our disposal, in that we have found customs and religions in non-European countries that are extraordinarily old or primitive, that is, primordial.
- (3) The dream as an initiation: for ancient man the dream is a *religious* experience, a preparation for death, the great finale of life.

Professor Jung: From the paper we have seen very clearly that antiquity interpreted dreams in exactly the same way as we do. As far as the strange metaphysics is concerned, which Macrobius brings up in connection with dreams, one can add that even though the soul as a spherical object is alien to us, we still dream of it in that way. It’s a well-known archaic idea. I’d like to give you an example. I treated a woman from America who stayed in Europe for some time. Midway through a series of interconnected dreams, suddenly a strange, short, and impressive dream appeared:¹³

The dreamer is alone in a house. Evening falls, and it occurs to her that she now must close the shutters and windows. She slowly starts to feel creepy. She locks everything. Then she remembers that a back door is still open, which she still must lock. She goes to that door and tries to lock it, but then discovers that the door has no lock and cannot be secured. The dreamer is stupefied, her fear mounts, and she thinks about ways of locking the door nevertheless. It gets darker and darker, and suddenly the door flies open, and something black and round shoots into her stomach. She wakes up with a scream.

I told her that this had to be something telepathic, and that she should memorize the exact date and write down the dream. It was a house she

¹³This dream is also discussed in vol. 1, chap. 1.

had last visited twenty years ago. One of her aunts lived there, whom she had never seen since. She was completely cut off from her, and had heard nothing from her. She didn't even know if that aunt were still alive. Three weeks later she received a letter from a niece, saying that the aunt had died that very day. This is the telepathic effect, which always takes the form of a "visitation," meaning, "it announced itself." This *visitatio*¹⁴ is often represented by a spherical psychic effect. This is an *ancient* idea, which she definitely had not learned in school, and so was new to her.

Platonic concepts were also developed out of experiences like the one in this dream. And Plato already encountered a theory according to which the soul was spherical in shape. There must have been a whole *corpus* of esoteric theories that taught transmigration. Transmigration is an original theory, rising out of immemorial darkness, from times that were stamped, as it were, by such experiences, a period that also harbored the experiences of medicine men or priests. Our knowledge eventually developed out of just such experiences.¹⁵ These experiences are authoritative for us, too, as a description of certain facts and as psychological case histories. So it is to our advantage if we are able to resort to such ideas.

¹⁴ Latin: visit, visitation.

¹⁵ Jung's extension of intellectual history into the immemorial is Macrobian, and therefore would have been demeaned by modern scholars until quite recently. Lynn Thorndike, for instance, describes Macrobius's esteem for the universally comprehensive character of Virgil and Cicero's texts as "extremist." For like Philo, he writes, Macrobius attributed to their single writings, notably Cicero's treatment of Scipio's dream, the ability to supply universal knowledge, indeed that it "was a work second to none and contained the entire substance of philosophy" (*The Place of Magic in the Intellectual History of Europe* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1905], 106).