LOCATING THE SELF IN THE EARLY MEDIEVAL WEST

Zora Žbontar

University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

e-mail: zora.zbontar@gmail.com

Resum

Tot aprofundint en les visions oníriques i l'actitud vers el cos i l'ànima, aquesta contribució presenta alguns punts de vista sobre l'autoreflexió a l'Antiguitat i l'Occident altmedieval. El descobriment de l'individu al segle XII va derivar d'un ressorgiment de formes i idees del passat. L'article examina exemples d'individualitat que es remunten a l'Antiguitat i l'Alta Edat Mitjana. A la tradició que hi havia al darrere de l'Edat Mitjana occidental, el cristianisme i el classicisme, l'individu i el coneixement d'un mateix van ser altament valorats.

Paraules clau: el *jo*, Occident altmedieval, autoreflexió, cristianisme, visions oníriques, cos.

Abstract

Providing insight into dream visions and the attitude towards body and soul, the contribution presents some perspectives on self-reflection in Antiquity and the early medieval West. The discovery of the individual in the twelfth century derived from a revival of forms and ideas from the past. The article examines examples of individuality that trace back to Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. In the tradition which lay behind the medieval West, Christianity and classicism, the individual and the self-knowledge were highly valued.

Key Words: the self, early medieval West, self-reflection, Christianity, dream visions, body.

INTRODUCTION

From the twentieth century onwards, an increasing number of medievalists highlighted the similarities between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries.[1] The discovery of the individual[2] in the sense of an increased sensitivity to the distinction between the self and the other[3]—a phenomenon attributed to the fifteenth century—can already be found in the preceding centuries, approximately after 1050 (WALKER BYNUM 1982: 82–83, 87–88).[4] This contribution does not aim to contradict that established similarity, but to show that the discovery of the individual took place even earlier than the twelfth century, providing examples that can be traced back to Antiquity and the early medieval West.

Drawing on literary and theological sources, this contribution analyses the attitude towards the body and the five senses in antique and early medieval dream visions. It tries to shed light, however briefly, on the concept of the individual in the historical and political context. It concentrates on the development of self-awareness and self-expression in a specific cultural context and aims to show that the early medieval perception of the body and the individual was ambivalent. For some intellectuals influenced by Plato's philosophy the true self of each individual was their soul, not their body. The goal was the liberation from the self, and to find the way to the mystical union between the soul and the One. Plato thought that the soul controlled the body (PLATO 2004: 605–606), whereas the corruptible body weighed down the soul (PLATO 2004: 1276).[5] On the other hand, Christians saw the body and the five senses as an instrument of salvation. The most important question regarding the resurrection was the actual identity of the resurrected body, which was believed to preserve the same form after death. The Christian view was that after death, the soul would await the bodily resurrection in a state of pain or joy (MOREIRA 2010: 36). "Elite Christian culture absorbed much from Neoplatonic thought; when distinctions had to be maintained it was often on purely doctrinal grounds" (MOREIRA 2010: 31).

DREAMERS AND THEIR SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

In their dream visions, Scipio and Boethius are presented as distinct individuals. In these ancient Roman and early medieval dream visions, the narrators participate as individual characters. It is

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[1] Some of these similarities are: 'humanism', the study of Latin literary classics, and an emphasis on human dignity and virtue, the revival of forms and ideas from the past (classical and patristic), the historical perspective, the exploration of nature and the cosmos, the 'naturalism' of the visual arts, and the emergence psychological self-examination of the individual (WALKER BYNUM 1982: 82). This subject is also addressed in: WALKER BYNUM 1980; BENTON 1991; DUBY 1988; GURJEWITSCH 1994; ANIMA 2006; ARIÈS 2009; ULLMANN 2010; MORRIS 2012).

[2] According to Suzanne Verderber, the term 'individual' does not have a stable definition in scientific papers and that leads to confusing arguments (VERDERBER 2013: 7).

[3] Benton claimed that in the twelfth century people did not use the term 'individual', but rather words like 'soul' (*anima*), 'self' (*seipsum*), or 'inner man' (*homo interior*).

[4] "You'll climb to heaven if you know yourself" was inscribed on the doorway of the church of Sant'Angelo in Formis (ca 1070). According to Colin Morris, the years between 900 and 1050 were not as anti-individualist as one might expect at first sight. However, individuals were caught within a network of loyalties, with little choice about their way of life and few opportunities to choose their own values (MORRIS 2012: 36).

[5] We have to bare in mind that the Plato's point of view regarding the relationship between the human soul and the body is not the same in all his dialogues (ALLIEZ, FEHER 1989: 48).

interesting that the presence of the dreamer gives the dream or vision a personal dimension that was not common in early romance (Knopp 1975: 15). In Antiquity and the Middle Ages, it was believed that dreams originated from different sources—individual hopes, fears, passion, the gods etc.

Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 B.C.E.) wrote *Scipio's Dream (Somnium Scipionis)*, which was originally part of the sixth book of his *On the Commonwealth* (*De re publica*). He was a keen observer of dialogues between individuals and was probably one of the most influential of the classical Roman writers among the intellectuals of the twelfth century (Morris 2012: 14–15).[6] Patristic writers had incorporated classical ideas that encouraged the interpretation of classical writers in Christian terms (Morris 2012: 20, 57).

Scipio recounts his travel to Africa as a military tribune (Knopp 1975: 148, 259). Africanus (Publius Cornelius Scipio, Africanus the Elder), Scipio's adopted grandfather, acted as a guide figure for Scipio in this dream, where they reach the region of the sky and look down on Earth; according to his grandfather it is a small, narrow area, where all is mortal and transitory in contrast to the eternal Universe. They discuss the individual after death, his insignificant life on Earth and Africanus says to Scipio: "What difference does it make whether you will be remembered by those who came after you when there was no mention made of you by men before your time? They were just as numerous and were certainly better men" (Cicero 2007: 263).

In his dreams Scipio talks to his late father Aemilius Paulus, who wants to teach him what kind of person he should aim to become. He says to him: "Scipio, cherish justice and your obligation to duty […]" (Cicero 2007: 261).

Cicero was influenced by Plato's philosophy and his attitude towards body and soul (Pfeiffer 2006: 45). For Cicero, as well as for Plato, the true self of each individual was their soul, not their body, e.g. Africanus makes such distinction when he says to Scipio: "[...] and regard not yourself but only this body as mortal; the outward form does not reveal the man but rather the mind of each individual is his true self […]" (Cicero 2007: 263). "[…] Scipio, you and all other dutiful men must keep your souls in the custody of your bodies and must not leave this life of men except at the command of that One who gave it to you […]" (Cicero 2007: 261). "[…] the supreme God rules the universe; and as the eternal God moves a universe that is mortal in part, so an everlasting mind moves your frail body" (Cicero 2007: 264).

Africanus warns Scipio to be aware of sensual passions: "[...] Who in response to sensual passion have flouted the laws of gods and of men, slip out of their bodies at death and hover close to the earth, and return to this region only after long ages of torment" (Cicero 2007: 264).

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[6] The emergence of thoughts and feelings among highly privileged social groups can be observed in Rome from around the year 50 B.C. (Morris 2012: 14).

In his *Commentary on Scipio's Dream* (*Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis*), Macrobius Ambrosius Theodosius (flourished ca. 399–422) explains the use of Scipio's fictional visions as a means of presenting natural and divine truths, as well as proper human behaviour. Macrobius' work was important for the preservation of Cicero's work. His commentary was popular in the Middle Ages because of his classification of dream types, e.g. the mental or physical distress of the individual was supposed to cause nightmares (Dream 2007: 265–267; Macrobius 1990).

Consolation of Philosophy by the Late Roman Christian philosopher Boethius[7] (ca 480–525 C.E.) was influenced by Platonism and Christian ideas (Knopp 1975: 149; Boethius 2003: XIX). Boethius was unjustly accused of treason and executed. During his imprisonment he wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy*. He describes his sadness by saying: "I who once wrote songs with keen delight am now by sorrow driven to take up melancholy measures […] Old age has come too soon with its evils […] My hair is prematurely gray, and slack skin shakes on my exhausted body" (Boethius 2007: 269). Seeing Boethius's sadness, Lady Philosophy speaks more gently, saying: "You are suffering merely from lethargy, the common illness of deceived minds. You have forgotten yourself, but you will quickly be yourself again when you recognize me" (Boethius 2007: 270).
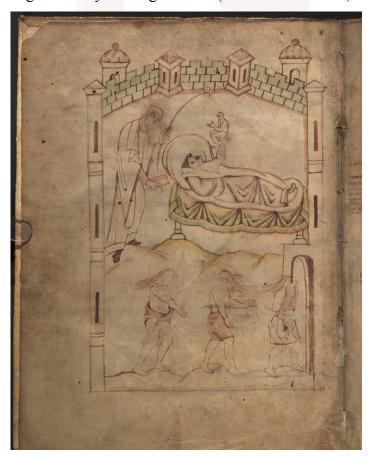

Fig.1. Medieval illumination from the end of the tenth century in Austrian National Library depicts Boethius' dream and his visionary experience (Hermann 1923; Golob 2013: 166, fig. 1). Austrian National Library (ÖNB), Cod. 271 fol. 1v.

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[7] Boethius influenced the culture of the twelfth century. Christianity provided continuity with Graeco-Roman culture, but the effects were not fully apparent for many centuries (Morris 2012: 17, 20).

Boethius is lying on a bed, holding his soul in his left hand and talking to Lady Philosophy. His soul is in the form of the body, like in the Aristotle's *De Anima*. The Muses of poetry are driven away by the Lady Philosophy, a central person of all virtues. Defeated Muses are sadly leaving Boethius. They express ancient gestures of mourning obvious from vase paintings and funerary plaques—they are scratching their face and beating their head. From this moment on Lady Philosophy acts like his Muse, she guides him to heaven and informs him of what true happiness means: "Riches, honor, power, fame, and worldly pleasure provide no real satisfaction […] true happiness is that which makes one self-sufficient and worthy of reverence" (Boethius 2007: 271).

Boethius supports the Platonic ideas of the universe. Lady Philosophy teaches him that goodness and true happiness are found in a divine Creator. She promises to give wings to his mind, not to his body, and guide him to heaven, where he will be able to share the holy light. Platonists did not believe in the resurrection of the body after death: "And I shall give wings to your mind which can carry you aloft, so that, without further anxiety, you may return safely to your own country under my direction, along my path, and by my means" (Boethius 2007: 272).

In their dreams, Scipio and Boethius contemplate the nature of the cosmos, the attainment of true happiness, and the individual's role in the natural order (Knopp 1975: 148). Their dream visions indicate that Cicero and Boethius were not strangers to self-expression, the feeling of dying, or to speaking of their own desires, fears, and experiences.

Christian Theology and Self-Consciousness

The Western concept of the individual owes a lot to Christianity. Self-reflection can be found in many works that are part of Christian tradition. Some scholars classify St Augustine's *Confessions* as the first autobiography ever written (Morris 2012: 10–11, 16). He was inspired by the texts of St Paul and Plato (Anima 2006: XV) and while his work obviously belongs to a Christian milieu, it is also related to a general tradition of self-enquiry in late Greco-Roman thought (Knopp 1975: 16). To St Augustine the discovery of the individual was the discovery of God,[8] not of the individual's unique personality (Anima 2006: XV).

In Christian theology, the incarnation was a central truth that led to the idea of the salvation of mankind (Hamburger 2002: 3; Soskice 1996: 32). "The belief that God had assumed a human nature meant that the physicality of the body, including the senses, could not be despised" (Soskice 1996: 32). Nevertheless, the relationship between body and soul manifested certain ambivalence (Anima 2006: XV–XVI).

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[8] In the Middle Ages, the introspection of each individual was focused on the self for the sake of God; today it is commonly for the sake of the self alone (Benton 1991: 285). The idea of self-knowledge as the path to God was clearly articulated particularly by writers in the monastic and eremitical tradition, such as Cistercians (Morris 2012: 66).

 In a passage of his Epistle to the Galatians, St Paul writes about the works of the flesh and that those who behave in such way will never have a place in God's kingdom. "If you are guided by the Spirit, you won't obey your selfish desires of the flesh. God's Spirit makes us loving, happy, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled" (Gal. V: 16).

St Augustine on the other hand, claimed that the soul was not dissociated from the body. He stated that many of these "works of the flesh" are faults of the human mind, not of the body (Augustine 1984: 549). He said that it was the Platonic theory of body and soul that made the nature of flesh responsible for all moral faults: "[…] it was not the corruptible flesh that made the soul sinful; it was the sinful soul that made the flesh corruptible" (Augustine 1984: 551); "the flesh can surely feel no desire or pain by itself, apart from the soul" (Augustine 1984: 576).

Nevertheless, a change in Christian imagination gradually occurred in the seventh century. According to Peter Brown, "the result was nothing less than a new view of sin, of atonement, and of the other world, which, in turn, laid the basis for a distinctive notion of the individual person and of his or her fate after death. These remained central concerns of western Christianity up to the Reformation and beyond" (Brown 2003: 220). In the writings of Gregory the Great and Columbanus, all aspects of human life could be explained through two categories: sin and repentance. Gregory the Great added a final tone to the Augustinian tradition of perpetual penance. This process had its roots in the Roman past, represented by Seneca and others, who stimulated constant self-examination, focusing on the individual's failings and the ways to corrected them (Brown 2003: 256). Sin explained everything: self-examination, secular matters, economy, prosperity, and so on. The emphasis on sin spotlighted the world of the dead (Brown 2003: 261, 262). In the seventh century the number of visionary tales of the otherworld increased.

In the vision of the Monk Barontus (678–79), written in the first person and with an emphasis on penance, his soul travelled to the otherworld and was judged for Barontus' personal sins—in his vision, the archangel Raphael and the demons struggled for his soul. The archangel rescued his soul and took it before the court of the eternal Judge but left a spirit in his body (Moreira 2000: 158–159). His otherworldly experiences addressed the problem of how much of the present self survives as a unique individual still subject to the laws of sin and repentance, even beyond the grave. In this light we can interpret the vision of the monk Barontus as "a first sketch of the awareness of the self on the part of the individual in Western Europe" (Brown 2003: 262). The vision suggests "that in Hibero-Frankish monasteries such tales were used actively as a didactic tool for prospective or recent convents" (Moreira 2000: 166). In the seventh century the clergy defined the rituals more clearly. Through penance the Church offered a possibility to an ongoing process of salvation (Moreira 2000: 164). In the seventh century the family care of the dead, which had been largely independent from the clergy became closely connected with it. "All expectations of a repentant sinner had to be channeled through the services of the clergy"

(Moreira 2000: 166). According to Gregory the Great the Mass was the only ceremony that could help the soul in the other world (Brown 2003: 263, 264).

Another interesting question is how the soul was visualized, especially after the year 700, when a highly individualized notion of the soul and a concern for its fate in the afterlife emerged (Brown 2003: 265). In Christian grave inscriptions, the soul does not speak about the past (which was typical in the Roman period) but about its present, anxious state. The dead were presented as sinners (Brown 2003: 264). Antique and medieval artists had problems illustrating the soul. As Michael Camille pointed out, the soul was difficult to illustrate because some writers associated it with breath—an invisible force (Camille 1996: 70). The soul was sometimes visualized as a bird or a bright, fiery sphere (Zaleski 1988: 51); in fact, the soul in the form of an animal was common in various cultures. In the vision of the monk Barontus, his soul was like a tiny bird. Barontus' soul afterwards received a body of air similar to the one he left behind to be able to journey through heaven and hell. The soul assumed a sharper image and the form of the body when Christians began to think of the afterlife as a period of activity rather than a state of repose (Zaleski 1988: 51). The idea that the soul is a "similitude of the body" can be found in patristic commentaries on the parable of Dives and Lazarus (Luke 16: 19–31) (Zaleski 1988: 50).

Rejection of the Body

In Christian thought, the body was an instrument of salvation, while the mystic way stemming from Plato[9] preferred a fully 'spiritual' religion, despising the concept of embodiment (Soskice 1996: 33).

In Orphism, Platonism, and the Pythagorean cult of ancient Greece, it was believed that the body holds the soul in bondage (Carruthers 2008: 64; Anima 2006). Plato's mystic way did not take real shape until the third century (Alliez, Feher 1989: 56). Plotinus (c. 204/5 – 270) provided a coherent interpretation of Plato, who, according to him "seemed ashamed to be in the body" (Plotin 2005: 44–45; Williams 1989: 129). Nevertheless, Plotinus proposed a rather different understanding of the body-soul relationship, for, in his view, human beings were related to both soul and intellect (Corrigan 2005: 228, 229).

Gnosticism is a term for religious movements in Late Antiquity that preferred the spiritual world and despised matter and the human body. "There were many different Gnostic sects during the first three or four centuries. Some were part of the larger Christian movements; others were separate from it" (Williams 1989: 130). We do not always know how they called themselves, even though some evidence for Gnosticism comes from actual Gnostic writings. Nevertheless,

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[9] According to Stephen Gersh, there is still much to be done to get a clearer overview of the impact of Platonism in medieval history. We need to make a clearer distinction between different varieties of Platonism, and evaluate the relationship between Platonism and Aristotelianism (Gersh 1991: 512, 512).

in Gnosticism the perception of the body was actually more complex (WILLIAMS 1989: 130). Williams demonstrated that the relationship between body and soul in Gnosticism was subject to a constant redefinition.[10]

THE INDIVIDUAL AFTER RESURRECTION

According to Peter Brown:

> […] it was in the early Middle Ages, and not earlier, that the Christian imagination took on its peculiar western shape. […] These novel 'perceptions' of ideas did not occur in late antiquity but in the period between 550 and 750. […] The first steps were also taken at this time toward a notion of purgatory, with all that such a notion implies for the idea of the continuing particularity of every soul and for the creation of permanent imaginative bonds between the living and the dead. (BROWN 2003: 24)

In Christian thought it was believed that people were mortal and had desires because of the original sin, and that was their punishment. But death was not the ultimate end of a human individual. In the Christian tradition, the confidence in the individual's worth is expressed in the belief in their continued life after death (MORRIS 2012: 3). According to St Augustine "[…] God has granted to faith so great a gift of grace that death, which all agree to be the contrary of life, has become the means by which men pass into life" (AUGUSTINE 1984: 514).

The most important question regarding the resurrection was the actual identity of the resurrected body. This question can be found already in the theories of the resurrection in the early centuries of the Christian Era. To Athenagoras the issue of identity was crucial in the resurrection. In chapter 25 of *De resurrectione* he writes: "[...] human being cannot be said to exist when body is scattered and dissolved, even if soul survives. But it will not be the same man unless the same body is restored to the same soul: such restoration is resurrection" (ATHENAGORAS *apud* WALKER BYNUM 1995: 32).

Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Minucius Felix sometimes employed metaphors suggesting, in the same vein as Athenagoras and Theophilus, that the resurrected body is exactly the same material body we occupy on Earth, meaning that material continuity accounts for identity (WALKER BYNUM 1995: 34). According to St Augustine, God reassembles and renews all the different parts of the body, whatever they are (TAZI 1989: 539–540). St Paul, in his third *Epistle to the Corinthians* says that the resurrection involves all of our particular flesh and that it carries our identity with it. The bodies we receive back in the resurrection are formally complete (WALKER BYNUM 1995: 29).

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[10] I focused on the way the human body was perceived by Christians and Christian heretics in the contribution *The Body in Medieval Western Culture: Fusion and Collision between Christianity and Past Mythical Conceptions* published in *Book of Proceedings: First International Interdisciplinary Conference for Young Scholars in Social Sciences and Humanities Contexts* (ŽBONTAR 2014).

The extensive writings on the resurrection of the body from the first six centuries inform us—not so much in their formal theological and philosophical arguments as in their asides, their analogies, the examples they adduce from common experience, their quotations and misquotations—which social context we should refer to in assessing the victory of a materialist theology (WALKER BYNUM 1994: 218).

THE VISION AND THE INDIVIDUAL

In Christianity, the five senses were important because they may all guide human beings to know God and themselves, although sight had enjoyed a privileged role in the phenomenology of the senses since the time of Plato and Aristotle. However, ambivalence towards sight existed from the Patristic period onwards (SOSKICE 1996: 31). On the one hand, Christians preferred vision above the other senses, but on the other hand, they also had reservations about it. They were cautious about the deceptiveness of sight. Images had to be left behind, if one was to reach heaven (THE MIND'S 2006: 4). The danger was that images might be perceived and understood with bodily eyes, as opposed to the eye of the mind (HAHN 2000: 178). A certain antipathy toward religious art was present among Latin critics, because it was supposed to be limited to the sensual apprehension of material forms.[11]

However, they trusted visions, because they could establish a connection with God. Early medieval images could evoke or stimulate different kinds of visions and activate the viewer's mind to contemplate higher, internal images in his mind (KESSLER 2000: 120). In early medieval Western thought, the material things of this world were no more than symbols of the divine. According to Gregory the Great, God also spoke in code, thus everything was heavy with meaning (*Moralia, sive Expositio in Job* 4.1.1.). "When images are to be understood as something invisible, imagining the invisible reveals itself necessarily as verbal in character. Text and pictures stimulated the imagination, opening the reader's understanding of invisible things" (LEWIS 1996: 6, 9). Words and images triggered mental processes. Reading sacred texts and observing images was part of an individual's meditation, understood as a creative process, because it stimulated mental images, thoughts, and feelings. Stimulated by imagery, the power of the reader's soul restored the images stored in the memory (LEWIS 2006: 6). In his *Commentary on Job* (*Moralia, sive Expositio in Job*) Gregory the Great emphasized that the image engraved on the soul or heart was then always available to the memory (GREGORY apud HAHN 2000: 176, 177). Intertwining of text and images did not only activate people's memory, but also served for meditation and to reach God (CARRUTHERS 2000: 2–5). On the other hand, for the school of Antioch the 'literal' meaning of the Bible was the most important. The Bible required the explanation of every single word and its historical context, that is, it was not an aid to meditation. In this way they differed from the

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[11] Only in the later Middle Ages could attention and desire linger, unsublimated, in the universe of bodily sensation.

tradition of the allegorical method. The meditative approach dominated particularly in the early medieval West (BROWN 2003: 370–371).

Augustine's concept of *homo exterior* and *homo interior* divided human activities into those focused on the outside world (*oculi carnis*) and others exploring the self and trying to find a path towards God (*oculi cordis*). This concept was a central idea of medieval theology and piety (GANZ 2006: 113). According to St Augustine, God is reflected in the individual, and can be reached through meditation. Sight was very important, for it was the sense closest to the mind's eye, and according to this he presented three kinds of visions. Corporeal or physical vision (*visio corporalis*) enables human beings to see the outside world. He wrote that this vision is worth little without some understanding of what is seen by means of the intellect. That is why such visions may be deceptive—the result of illness, tricks of the Devil, pain, or illusion (SOSKICE 1996: 34). He called the second type of vision 'spiritual vision' (*visio spiritualis*). With spiritual vision people imagine things in their minds even if they do not look at them. Intellectual vision (*visio intellectualis*) enables human beings to obtain a vision of God (BIERNOFF 2002: 25–26). Within the medieval tradition of spiritual optics, the possibility of a fully visible and meaningful reality inhered only in God.

A blind person was believed to be in direct communication with a deity, and therefore did not need a mediator (e. g. a picture) between the body, the mind, and God. Blind people travelled between two worlds in their spiritual landscape. In many cultures the blind were believed to have connections with other worlds. It was not always clear what kind of realities these were and the attitude towards blindness kept changing in the past. In Antiquity, blindness was mainly interpreted as the fault of having seen the gods when not supposed to see them, but it was also understood as an unusual gift. In the cases of Isaac and Jacob, blindness was not a punishment. References to blindness are frequent in the Bible (for instance, see Eli and Ahijah). In theology, blindness was not interpreted just as a punishment for sins committed (BARASCH 2001: 3, 45). Paul's temporary blindness was an opportunity for a supernatural vision, which brought some new elements of understanding of blindness to the early Christian world (BARASCH 2001: 56–64). But there are more examples, a sixth-century abbot, Spes, who governed a monastery close to Norica suffered from physical blindness and possessed interior illumination. This could not be understood as a simple exchange, but as a form of suffering. God gave him his sight back before death as a sign that his suffering was coming to an end. God's punishment of a holy man in the present life was presented as a sign of unique favour that saved him from the eternal torments of hell (MOREIRA 2010: 43).

Conclusion

This contribution focuses on the development of self-awareness and self-expression in Antiquity and the early medieval West. The Christian intellectuals that followed Plato's philosophy were identified with the renunciation of the physical body; the identity of a person was not bound to the body, but only to their soul. On the other hand, in medieval Christian thought the body was an important instrument of salvation and the locus of personal identity. The relationship between body and soul was thus subject to constant redefinition. The Christian attitude towards death included different viewpoints, ranging between the idea of the natural immortality of the soul and the view that body and soul were united and that death could be a terrible loss (ZALESKI 1988: 46). These impressions suggest the complexity of the general understanding of the body and soul in the early Middle Ages.[12]

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