

Ye Old Prognostication

Prognostics in Anglo-Saxon
Manuscripts

Who were the Anglo-Saxons

- Germanic people from modern day Denmark, the Netherlands and north-west coastal Germany.
- Arrived in Britain around 410 CE.
- Christianity arrives around 565 CE, becomes popular around 655 CE.
- Old English (Anglo-Saxon, Englisc) is the language of the people, Latin is the language of the church and government.
- End of the Anglo-Saxon period is 1066 CE.



Manuscripts

- Manuscript Culture came to England with Christianity.
- Creation of manuscripts and codices was the provenance of monasteries, abbeys, and similar.
- Codices required significant amounts of time and material to produce and thus, were quite expensive.
- Codices were owned by religious houses and wealthy individuals.
- Writing and reading became very important to the elites of Anglo-Saxon society. A large corpus of legal documents, prose and poetry, letters, and other documents survive, in addition to religious texts.



What is a Prognostic?

- Prognostics are “codified means of predicting events in the lifetime of an individual or identifiable group of individuals, using observation of signs and times, or mantic divination.” (Chardonnes, 7)
- These were not separate books, but were included in religious, medical, and other texts, either as a distinct section or otherwise incorporated into the larger text
- “They exist somewhere in the scholarly no man’s land between English and Latin, folklore and science, medicine and monastic computus, classical learning and vernacular tradition...”
- Earliest example is in the calendar for MS Digby 63, in the Bodleian's collections, which dates to the ninth century.
- Heyday of the prognostic was in the 11th century, from which approximately 120 originate, 105 of these were produced in England.
- Some forms of prognostication have been interpreted as an early form of observational natural science.

Where did Prognostics come from?

- Three 'genres' of prognostic date from "antiquity"
 - Dreambooks (from the 3rd millennium BCE onwards)
 - Apuleian spheres (from the 4th century CE onwards)
 - Egyptian Days (354 CE onwards)
- Unfortunately, there is no textual link between these earliest examples and the Anglo-Saxon Prognostics.
- Some authors (for example R.M. Liuzza) propose a stage of 'memorial transmission', but this is disputed.
- Some prognostic genres appear to be uniquely Anglo-Saxon.
 - Twelve Egyptian Days
 - Prognostication based on the color of the moon
 - Gender prediction
 - Bloodletting prognostic based on the hours of the day
 - Month prognostic for health based on the day of the new moon
- Most prognostics appear to have continental antecedents from the 8th through the 11th centuries.

Dreambooks

- Appear in Old English and Latin.
- Dream books are the oldest type of prognostic that appear in the Anglo-Saxon corpus.
- Basically, you look up your dream and it tells you what it means.
- Examples from
 - Cotton Tiberius A. iii, mid 11th century, Christ Church, Canterbury
 - Hatton 115, 11th century, Christ Church, Canterbury
 - Cotton Titus D.xxvi, early 11th century, New Minster, Winchester
 - Sloane 475, 11th or 12th century, England?
- Gif man mæte þæt his mon ehte. Yfel þæt bið.
 - If a man has a dream about being chased. That is evil.
- Gif he geseo twegen monan , þæt byð mychel gefea.
 - If a man sees two moons, that means great joy.
- Gif him þince þæt hine earn swythe eahte, þæt byð mycel gefea.
 - If it seems he is being attacked by an eagle, that means great joy.
 - In another dream book in the same manuscript, this represents evil.

Brontology

- Appear in Old English and Latin.
 - Brontology is the study of lightning, in the context of prognostics it is the use of lightning to predict future events.
 - Predictions rely on the time of day, day of the week, month of the year, or compass direction.
 - Most predictions in brontologies deal with births, deaths, and general doom, rarely do these types of prognostic predict the weather.
- Si tonitruauerit hora uespertina. Significat natiuitatem cuiusdam magni
 - If it thunders at twilight, it signifies the birth of someone great.
 - Gif hit on tiwesdæg þunrige, þæt tacnað wæstma geswefrunge.
 - If it thunders on a Tuesday, that means failure of crops.
 - Gif hit on monandæige þunrige þonne tacnað þæt micelne blodgyte on sumre þe(o)de.
 - If it thunders on a Monday, that means that there will be a great bloodshed among some nation.

Lunaria

- Appear in Old English and Latin.
- Lunaries rely on the phases or of the moon to determine future events or the best time to begin medical treatments.
 - Two subgenres, zodiacal lunaries and “mansions of the moon” rely on the passage of the moon through the zodiac and sidreal month.
- Lunaries often appear with medical texts and posit the effect of the moon on a patient’s health.
- On anre nihte ealdne monan se þe hine adl gestandeð, se bið frecenlice gestanden.
 - On a moon one night old, he who is attached by disease will be dreadfully attacked.
- Gif hine on .ii nichta ealdne monan adl gestandeþ, sona he ariseþ.
 - If it attacks him on the second night, he will soon arise.
- Gif he bið eahta nihta eald, 7 hine adl gestande, se bið hraþe sweltende.
 - If it is eight nights old and disease should attack him, he will die quickly.

Dies Mala/Egyptian Days, and Dog Days

- Usually appear on calendars, but lists appear in Old English and Latin.
- Three different systems for calculating auspicious or inauspicious days of the month.
- Usually associated with medical texts.
- These days were either good or bad for bloodletting, beginning new medical treatments, or similar.
- Dog days rely on the days when the Dog Star (usually Sirius in Canis Major, rarely Procyon in Canis Minor) appears on the horizon.
 - The period in which the Dog Days fall was between July 14 and September 5.
- Egyptian Days or Dies Mala are the most frequently attested type of prognostic.
 - Usually appear as calendar entries, usually as “Dies Mala”
 - Appear as either 3, 12, or 24 days per year.

A Quick Word on Ye

pe →  →  → ye

So, every time you see “Ye Olde Shoppe”, remember to read “The Old Shop” and make bad faces at the spelling of “olde” and “shoppe”.