

Prognostics: monastic divination or licit guidance? The evidence of the Reading Abbey prognostic collection in BL Ms Harley 978

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Medieval prognostics constitute a category of short texts, usually offering advice for making decisions or dealing with problems such as illness. Until relatively recently they were dismissed as mere superstition and attracted rather little attention from scholars.¹ This began to change in the late twentieth century, when early-medieval prognostics, and perhaps especially those in Anglo-Saxon and Carolingian manuscripts, were given serious attention.² Following on from this, attention has been given to prognostics in other vernaculars, such as Anglo-Norman French and Middle English.³ However, it is still the case that Latin prognostics in use in the central middle ages tend to be overlooked, even when they are found in manuscripts which have been the subject of considerable discussion. An example of this is an impressive manuscript, now Harley 978 in the British Library, which is linked to Reading Abbey by its calendar. The manuscript can be dated by the obits in the calendar, by the political poem it contains, and by the style of its scripts and decoration to the 1260s. It is composite, although all its main sections appear to have been produced at the same time, and to include work by professional scribes probably based in Oxford. It is perhaps best known for containing the words and music for the well-known round, *Sumer is icumen in*. Almost equally famous is its collection of the works of the pioneering, twelfth-century poet, Marie de France; and it is also outstanding for its collection of Goliardic verse.⁴ From this it will be clear that this volume was not only a professional product but was also not intended for use in the monastic *lectio divina*. A fuller listing of its contents will show just how wide-ranging, and

predominantly secular, it is. The following outline is based on the British Library's online catalogue description.⁵

The manuscript is described as follows: 'A miscellany or 'manual' including poems, fables, musical, and medical texts, several of which are unique to this collection, such as the song 'Sumer is icumen in', the 'Song of Lewes', several poems by Marie de France and Goliardic verses. The collection was possibly compiled between 1261 and 1265. The contents are:

1. Musical miscellany (ff. 2r-15r) including: Latin songs (ff. 2r-8v); untexted estampies (dances) in two parts (ff. 8v-9r); three-part polyphonic conductus (ff. 9v-10r); four-part rota canon '*Sumer is icumen in*, *Lhude sing cuccu*', with an alternative Latin text, '*Perspice christicola*' (f. 11v); Three monophonic sequences: (ff. 12r-13v); Solmisation table explaining the Gamut (f. 14r); Solfeggio exercise setting the words '*Est tonus sic: ut re ut ...*' (ff. 14v-15r).
2. Calendar with prognostications; proverbs (ff. 15v-21v);
3. Medical miscellany (ff. 22r-37r): Pseudo-Aristoteles, *Epistula ad Alexandrum Magnum de corpore humano sanando* (from the *Secretum Secretorum*), translated by John of Seville (ff. 22r-23r); Medical treatise (ff. 23r-25v); Glossary of herbs (ff. 26r-27v); Pseudo-Hippocrates, *Letter to Caesar (Regimen sanitatis)*, with an addition (ff. 27v-35v); including an ophthalmological recipe '*Ad clarificandum visum*' (f. 30r); Medical recipes (ff. 35r-35v); Pseudo-Aristoteles, *Epistula ad Alexandrum Magnum de corpore humano sanando* (from the *Secretum Secretorum*), translated by John of Seville, excerpts (ff. 35v-36v); Verses on the plant scabiosa (f. 37r);
4. Two letters (for monastic or clerical use) (f. 38r);
5. Short texts in prose and verse by various hands (ff. 38r-39v);
6. Marie de France, *Fables* (ff. 40r-67v);
7. Walter Map, Poems (ff. 68v-74v);
8. Literary miscellany in verse and prose (ff. 75r-117v): Goliardic verses including poems by Walter Map (ff. 75r-107r); *Song of Lewes or Song of the Barons* (ff. 107r-114r); A legend of Becket's parents (ff. 114v-116r); Dialogue on falconry in verse, excerpt (ff. 116v-117r);
9. Marie de France, *Lais* (ff. 118r-160r);

10. List of musical works, notes, etc (ff. 160v–162r).

The range of interests and activities covered is clearly wide, from instruction in new and fashionable styles of singing, through equally fashionable (and daring) literary works to advice on health care and the medical properties of plants. As other commentators have noted, some of the contents, such as the goliardic verses and perhaps the political sentiments of the *Song of Lewes*, would have appealed primarily to students and young scholars. Almost equally surprising is the text on falconry; and even the ‘legend’ about the parents of Thomas Becket was not widely shared in monastic manuscripts. The presence of the *Song of Lewes* is especially surprising given that the abbey’s leading patron was King Henry III, who visited frequently and perhaps most intensively at the time when this manuscript was produced and compiled. Nevertheless, that very fact is perhaps a clue to the puzzle of why the contents were brought to Reading and put together with a Reading calendar. When the king visited he did not do so alone but accompanied by large numbers of courtiers, attendants and servants, male and female, all of whom potentially required not only bed and board but also entertainment and, if necessary, healthcare. An abbey guest master facing such a daunting task might well have need of texts like those assembled in Harley 978 as well as of individuals who could make use of them. This is certainly the context in which the prognostic texts found in the second section of the manuscript make most sense, since advice is offered to women as well as to men.

Before moving on to look at the specific prognostic texts copied into this manuscript it is very important to take note of the highly unusual context within which they are presented. It is a central argument of this paper that the prognostics were an integral part of the Reading calendar with which they are found, rather than being marginal additions. The mise-en-page of the calendar immediately demonstrates how important the prognostics were, since the side margins are unusually wide in order to provide sufficient space. A comparison of the January pages of the Harley 978 calendar and the almost-contemporary Reading calendar in a psalter, now New York, Morgan MS M 103, will demonstrate this.⁶ The Morgan Psalter has the standard, almost-universal calendar layout, with dating information confined to

four narrow columns at the left of each folio and a broad, main column recording graded feasts to be celebrated on the relevant days. There is nothing equating to the columns provided for the prognostics in Harley 978, which are unique.

As the images below show, the side margins of the Harley 978 calendar occupy almost one third of the ruled space and are carefully set out. The prognostic texts themselves are formally written, apparently by the main scribe of the calendar, from f. 15v (January) until f. 17r (April). On f. 15v the first prognostics are fitted neatly into a carefully-planned column of 39 lines, while the central column has 32 lines.

On f. 16r (February) the opening section of the prognostic text (a lunary) is confined to 32 lines by the presence at the bottom of the folio of a mnemonic on the calculation of Easter Sunday. On folios 16v (March) and 17r the same careful planning and formal writing of the prognostic itself continues even though completion of the calendar column stops. However, from f. 17v (May) to 19r (August) the prognostics are entered in a paler ink and a different hand, which is considerably later in appearance and more widely spaced than the first hand. The core dates appear in the same style in the central columns of each month and were clearly inserted when the calendar was first drawn up. However, the entries for saints' days, moveable feasts and (Reading) obits appear only on the first two folios. Thus, September to December have only the basic dates in the Julian calendar.

From this summary it will already be clear that this might be seen as an attempt to create a 'prognostic calendar'. It also appears that the project was not entirely successful, since the first attempt was abandoned after four folios had been (partially) completed. Still more puzzling is the fact that the text originally left incomplete was seamlessly completed in the fifteenth century, despite the very long intervening period. This text is a lunary, which was perhaps the most frequently occurring (and varied) type of prognostic. Lunarics offered advice concerning each day of a (thirty-day) lunar month, focusing on: healthcare; tasks to be undertaken (or not); and the likely outcomes of things such as being born, experiencing dreams, and searching for lost or stolen property. Following the completion of the lunary, two further prognostic texts were also added. This seems to imply that both the Harley volume itself and exemplars of prognostics remained available

and were considered useful. Indeed, since the two last prognostics are unusual, it is possible that they only became available in the early fifteenth century and that their acquisition inspired the second phase of work on the prognostic calendar.

In this context it is worth noting that the prognostics, and the basic calendar with which they are paired, are thematically linked to the next section of the volume, which contains a selection of short works providing medical information and guidance. The location of the manuscript throughout the period c. 1260–c. 1400 does appear to have been Reading, or perhaps its cell of Leominster, as other additions and notes in other parts of the volume confirm. Perhaps best known of these later additions is the list of musical works entered in a fourteenth-century hand on ff. 160v–162r. This list is headed 'Ordo libri W. de Wint[onia]' and gives the textual incipits of eight Marian tropes under the heading 'R[esponsorium] R. de Burg[ate]', 37 alleluia settings under the heading 'Postea R[esponsorial] W. de Wic[umbel]', 38 'cund[uctus]', 13 'Moteti cum duplici nota' and 48 'Item cum duplici littera'. This list and the names it includes have been extensively discussed but are relevant here for providing ongoing connections to the Reading monastic community.⁷ However this does not alter the fact that this calendar is far from being a 'standard' version of the Reading liturgical calendar.

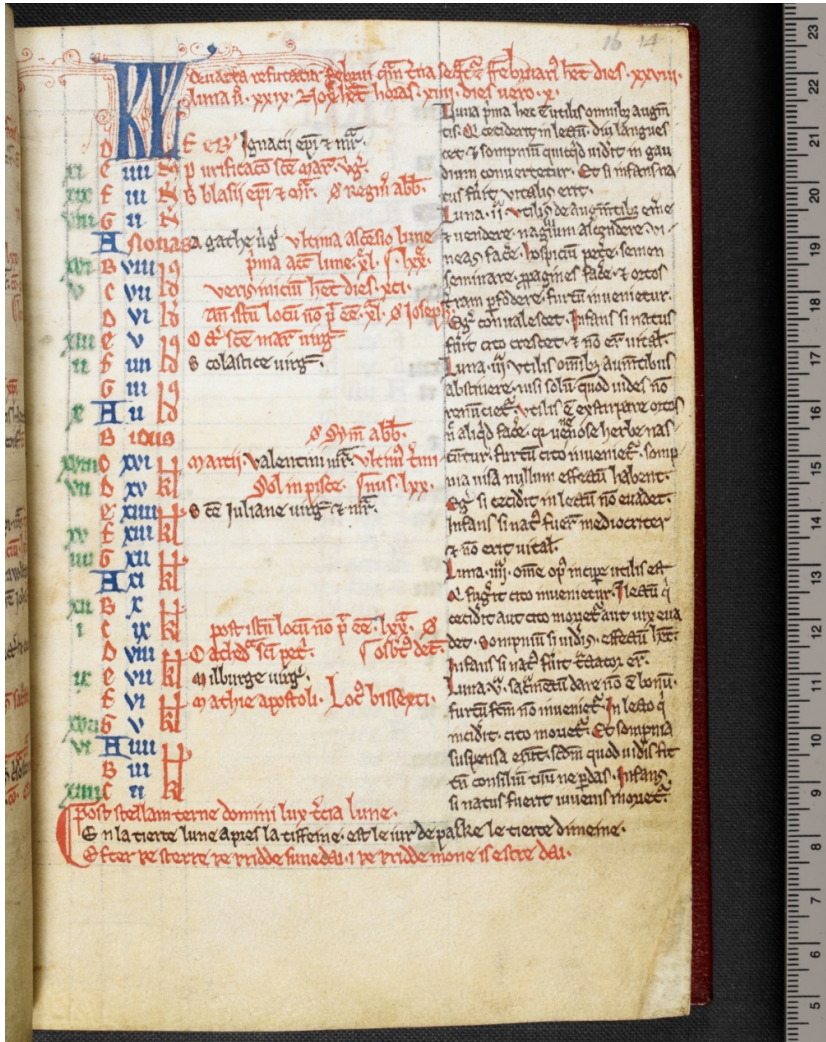


Illustration 2. B.L. MS Harley 978, f. 16r. Image by permission of the British Library

At the head of the prognostic column on f. 15v, written in red, is a verse mnemonic for the so-called 'Egyptian days' in January. These perilous days were integrated into ecclesiastical calendars in the early-medieval period and remained standard, in varying forms, until the late thirteenth century – when theological disapprobation finally took effect.⁸ The days identified as dangerous here are the first (*prima dies*) and the seventh [from the end of the month] (*septenaque*). It is worth noting that an expert user is here assumed since the actual days are not marked in the calendar and the calculation of the second day is not explained. The simpler statement about the hours of daylight and darkness during this month (respectively eight and sixteen) is separately placed, at the top of the column containing feasts and obits. It is also interesting that the identification of perilous days is placed above the more common, broadly computistical, information that the solar month of January has 31 days and its 'Moon' has 30. The Moon referred to here is the synodic lunar month, taken as running from new moon to new moon. These almost never coincided entirely with a solar month and so the standard rule was that the lunation 'of' a solar month was that which ended in it, even if the two months coincided for only a few days. The length of these computistical lunar months was also fixed, as the statement quoted implies, and alternated between 30 days (as in January) and 29 (as in February) to accommodate the fact that the synodic lunar month is, on average, approximately 29.5 days long. This information was relevant for any cleric concerned to apply computistical expertise but was not strictly necessary in a 'liturgical' calendar, assuming that the user did not need to be able to calculate independently the date of Easter in any given year. It is not included, for instance, in the calendar in the nearly-contemporary Psalter from Reading, now New York, Morgan Library, MS M 103.⁹

As noted above this manuscript displays the standard and much more familiar layout of a liturgical calendar page. The emphasis is almost entirely on the celebration of saints' feasts, with computistical information reduced to a narrow column on the far left which contains the 'golden numbers'.¹⁰ The latter refer to years in the nineteen-year, computistical cycle and identify the days on which new (synodic) lunar months would begin in the stated year of the cycle. However, the equally standard information as to the day on which the sun moved from one

house of the zodiac to the next is omitted, even though the conventional images of zodiac signs are depicted in roundels at the top of each folio. The approach of the creator of the Harley 978 calendar was very different, to the extent that it might be suggested that tracking the inter-related movements of the sun and moon was one of the main functions of this calendar. Indeed, the overall allocation of space in the Harley calendar is closer to that found in the calendar of an entirely computistical manuscript, the well-known volume, probably from Thorney Abbey, which is now Oxford, St John's College, MS 17. The calendar page for January is on folio 16r and the image below shows that it shares several of the entries found in Harley 978 as well as restricting the space allocated for the feasts of saints in the central column and having nearly one third of the width of the folio dedicated to columns of computistical data. It must also be acknowledged, however, that St John's 17 shows more interest in antiquarian information on historic calendars than it does in prognostic texts or the timing of medical interventions.

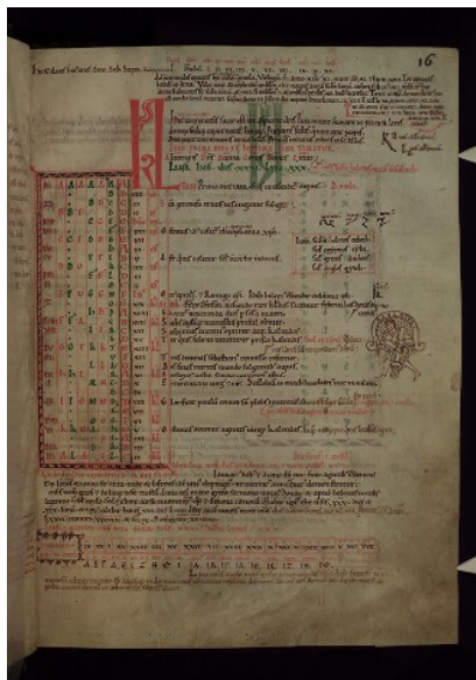


Illustration 3. Oxford, St John's College MS 17, f. 16r. Image by permission of the President and Fellows of St John's College, Oxford

As Illustration 1 (above) shows, the Harley calendar provides careful entries for the calculation of the feasts which led up to the celebration of Easter itself. These began well before Lent, with Septuagesima covered in January, beginning with the note *clavis lxx* (here placed on the 7th) followed by *prima accensio lune lxx* on the 8th (running on to the line of the 9th). On the 17th is *terminus lxx* while the 18th has both *Initium lxx* and *sol in Aquario*. It is significant that all these entries are in red and thus shown as more important than many of the saints' feasts. Septuagesima itself was the third Sunday before the start of Lent and the ninth Sunday before Easter itself, hence the significance of the new moons (the *accensio lune*) in determining its date as they did (with full moons) that of Easter Sunday. Indeed, it was because the date of the great festival of Easter Sunday was linked to the occurrence of a full Moon (itself falling close to the Spring Equinox) that information

regarding lunar months was included in ecclesiastical calendars. As often, little attention is paid to Sexagesima and Quinquagesima, but 28th Jan has the entry, again in red, *clavis xl*, marking the run-up to Quadragesima. Similarly in February we find the information on Egyptian days, the lengths of the solar and lunar months, and the hours of light and darkness, in red at the top of the folio (although presented slightly less carefully than in January). The calculation of Septuagesima and Quadragesima is again clearly marked in red, with entries for the former on 5th, 14th and 21st February and for the latter at the 6th and 8th. The start of Spring is marked, also in red, at 7th February, with the information that the season has 91 days (useful for medical treatments). The movement of the Sun into Pisces is marked at 15th February while the point of insertion of the extra day in a leap year (*Locus bissexti*) is marked as usual at the 24th.

Further emphasis on the calculation of Easter is shown by the entry of an unusual mnemonic at the bottom of the calendar page for February. This is given in Latin, Anglo-Norman and Middle English, each formally written on its own line, with lines alternating in red and black. Most laconic is the Latin version, which states: *Post stellam terne domini lux tertia lune*. The Middle English gives the similarly enigmatic: *After þe sterre þe þridde sunedai i þe þridde mone is ester dai*; while the Anglo-Norman identifies the starting point for the calculation as *la tisseine*. Unfortunately, none of these terms matches any entry in the calendar itself so that once again a user familiar with the calculations appears to be assumed. Since this simplified calculation is in some tension with the careful entries in the main calendar, and is given in two vernaculars as well as in Latin, it seems likely that advice to be communicated to a lay person is intended here. Such a conclusion is encouraged by the fact that the glossary of medical herbs, which follows in the next section of the manuscript (on folios 26r–27v) is also given in three languages.¹¹

After all this it comes as something of a surprise to find that the subsequent calendar folios (from March on) lack all but the basic dating information and the prognostics, with the latter remaining confined to their own portion of the page (see Illustration 4 below). The result is that the prognostic (a lunar) dominates, and can still be linked to the information about the lunar calendar provided in the calendar itself.

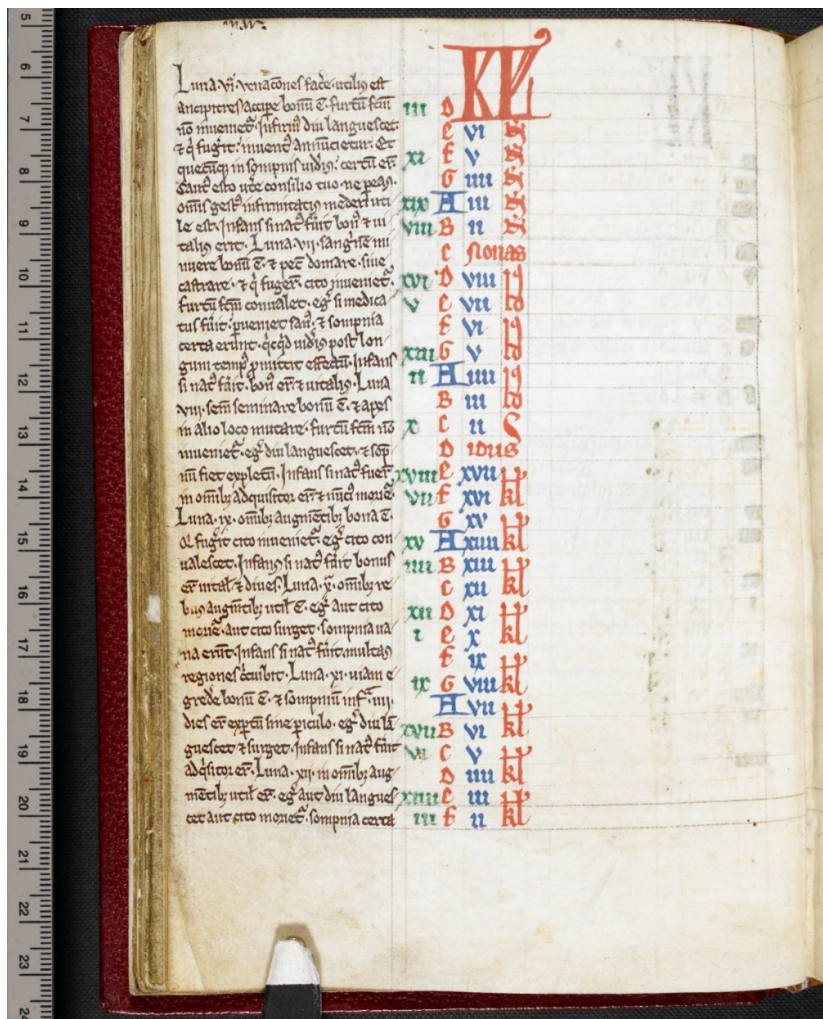


Illustration 4. BL, Harley Ms 978, f. 16v. Image by permission of the British Library

Indeed, the exact choice and arrangement of texts appears to be unique to this manuscript, confirming again that it was made for a specific user and purpose rather than as part of the standard monastic schedule and routine. That, however, is not to say that the prognostic texts placed in the outer margins are eccentric in themselves; rather the main group consists of examples of well-established and widely-accepted forms of prognostication which are unusual only in their placement.

The first prognostic flourishes its (fake) credentials by opening with the authoritative name of Bede, revered both as a theologian and as the author of what was still, in the mid thirteenth century, one of the most widely used works on computus (see Illustration 1 above). Thus we are assured that *Beda dixit* (Bede said) that there are three days in the month of February on which, if a baby boy is born, his flesh will not decay until the day of judgement, and that these are the Ides of February, vi Kal March and ii Kal March. This brief statement is known to modern editors as ‘the three miraculous birthdays’ and is found in several different versions from the eleventh century on, although the spurious attribution to Bede is a later development. Chardonnens found versions in six English manuscripts, including St John’s 17, with three in Old English and three in Latin.¹² The terminology used and the dates identified in these six vary considerably, suggesting that a large number of exemplars was already in circulation; but it is noteworthy that none attributes the text to Bede. This brief prognostic, as the comments above show, originally circulated on its own. However, Harley 978 follows it immediately with another short text, giving the impression that both are to be attributed to Bede. This identifies another three days, this time perilous days rather than miraculous ones. These are the last ‘moon day’ in April, the first ‘moon day’ entering (intrans) August, and the last ‘moon day’ at the end of (exeunte) December. These days are to be understood as Mondays, although the descriptors *intrans* and *exeunte* introduce a certain amount of ambiguity. On these days medical treatment in the form of blood letting or taking of medicines is to be avoided since there is great danger that death will ensue. It is also fatal to eat goose meat on those days; and deeply unfortunate to be born on any of them, since all such individuals will die an evil death. The compiler of this information clearly sought for completeness, since an

alternative version of the 'three miraculous birthdays' is added next, this one stating that there are three days on which a female will not be conceived and a boy, if conceived or born then, will have a body which will never decay. These days are here identified as the last day of December and the first two days of January. This text also is found elsewhere and it is noteworthy that the 'Reading' version is slightly muddled, since it appears to say that a woman will not conceive (*concipiet*) rather than be conceived (the more frequent *concipitur*). Further reasons to take the information seriously follow, in the form of the concluding comments that not many people know this, and that it is true, which also neatly fill the final lines of the prognostic column on f. 15v.

The time and place at which these originally separate prognostics were brought together and attributed to Bede are not known, but the composite version found in Harley 978 appears to be relatively early. A small group of comparable texts in Latin, Middle English and French is listed and discussed by Tony Hunt, who finds examples from the thirteenth century to the fifteenth.¹³ Textually closest to Harley 978 is Bodleian, MS Rawlinson D248, of the fifteenth century and of unknown provenance. This manuscript appears to be a personal selection of wide-ranging theological, historical, scientific and prophetic texts and is clearly not directly related to Harley 978. Closer in date, as well as in provenance and function is Rawlinson C939, the thirteenth-century Cartulary of Oseney Abbey.¹⁴ This volume contains a range of information useful for the annual running of the institution, and it is striking that it includes, on folio 98r, a version of the same information on perilous days and medical treatments, although with the attribution to Bede differently expressed and with varying details. On folio 97v, and again on folios 98v–99r, is information in French on other perilous days in each month and on phlebotomy. The similarities to and differences from the Reading manuscript are equally striking and strongly suggest that the information had been taught to individuals capable of translating and paraphrasing it at need, rather than being dependent on copying it from an exemplar.¹⁵ This increases the impression that the texts were treated as practical knowledge of a specialised and useful sort, as does the fact that later versions are increasingly likely to be found in medical collections.

An example not discussed by Hunt, and again intended for use in a major monastic institution, is found in the Customal of Rochester Cathedral Priory, datable to c. 1275 – c. 1300 and now Maidstone, CKS, DRc/R2. The main contents of the volume deal with the dues to be paid to the priory from many sources, and with the various workshops and functions within the institution which were funded by these payments.¹⁶ Unusually for such a volume the manuscript also contains medical recipes and texts, apparently to be used for both the monks and their secular officials and servants. These are placed early in the manuscript, and the text on miraculous and perilous days, again attributed to Bede, is found on folios 4 recto and verso, following three short medical texts. As the image shows, the texts are formally written and were intended to have coloured initials although these were never supplied. The compiler of the volume is named, in a later hand, as Brother J. de Westerham, a monk who rose to be prior at the start of the fourteenth century. This Rochester version of the *Sanctus Beda dixit* text is very close to that in Harley 978 and both seem to mark a stage in its development and use.

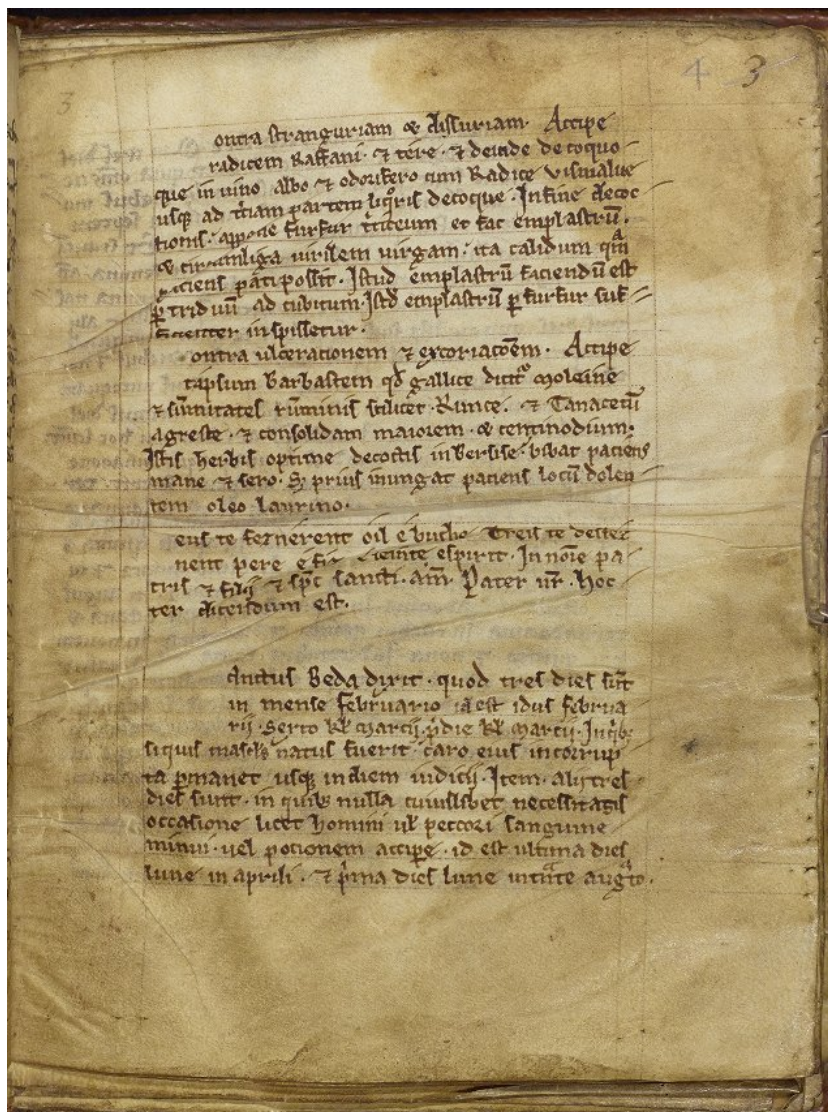


Illustration 5. Maidstone, CKS, DRc/R2, f. 4r. By permission of the Chapter of Rochester Cathedral.

In both cases, despite the apparent conclusiveness of the statement that all the above is true, a fourth piece of information immediately follows, giving the impression that this too comes from Bede. This also relates to perilous days, in this case a list of two days 'in the lunation of any [solar] month' which are to be avoided by anyone who wishes to start a new undertaking of any sort. It is worth noting that users of this text would be greatly helped by its placing in Harley 978, where the dates of new moons in each month are helpfully shown in the calendar pages and identification of the lunation 'of the month' is also made easier. The cluster of four pieces of related information in these thirteenth-century manuscripts can be contrasted with the scattering of separate elements in twelfth-century manuscripts such as Oxford, St John's College, Ms 17. Here the 'three perilous days' and 'three miraculous birthdays', both anonymous, are found on folio 3v. The monastic interest in phlebotomy, and its close relation to timing of monastic life, is shown by the presence of no less than three short texts on phlebotomy placed at the start of this computistical collection (folios 1v-2v). These too are related to the material later ascribed to Bede but are here anonymous.¹⁷ It is equally clearly to be distinguished from the longer compound texts edited by Migne as works dubiously attributed to Bede under the titles *De signis et horis xii mensium*, *De nativitate infantium libellus* and *De minutione sanguinis, sive de phlebotomia*. Most striking, however, is the clear practical importance attributed to these texts not only in Harley 978 but also in the volumes from Oseney and Rochester.

The fact that these prognostics, bringing together ideas about the relationship between the human body and the luni-solar calendar, are followed by a lunary is clearly not surprising. Lunaries constitute one of the most frequently occurring types of prognostic across the medieval period. They are usually organised by the days of a lunar month (lunation), often called the 'age' of the moon, and are also known as Moonbooks. Like most types of prognostic they tended to grow longer over time as more categories of information were added into the basic format, but this was by no means the only line of development.¹⁸ Lunaries, whatever their language, can broadly be divided into two types: the most numerous are those which give advice on a range of activities; the rest are more specialised, and several of these have

medical applications. The example given in Harley 978 is of the general type, but is rather unusual within its category in having no information relating to bloodletting. The text starts at the top of the February page (see Illustration 2 above) immediately below the information about the number of days in the month and the hours of daylight. Like the preceding prognostic texts it is in black ink and has no title. Its first statement is that the first day of any lunation (*Luna prima*) is: good for increasing and improving all things; bad for anyone who falls ill, since their illness will linger for a long time; but fortunate for things seen in dreams. Finally, babies born on this day will be full of life. Similarly, we next learn that day two is good for increasing certain things (though not all), for tracking down thieves and things stolen, and for recovering from illness. Sadly, babies born on this day will grow fast but will not thrive. Day three is not a good day for most undertakings, although theft will quickly be uncovered. Dreams will not have any effect, illness also will have poor outcomes; and finally babies born on this day will be undistinguished and lacking in energy. From these examples it can be seen that five main types of information are included, although not all are covered on any given day. These are: tasks and their outcomes; stolen goods; prognoses for illness; dreams and their significance; prognoses for newborn infants. This pattern continues, in the same hand, through the folios for March and April, reaching day twenty-one at the bottom of folio 17r. This day, on which the moon reaches its last quarter, is generally unpropitious for activities, dreams and illness but at least babies will grow up to be hardworking (though *laboriosus* might also mean that they will encounter hardship).

Scholars have argued that compound (or collective) lunaries like this one were compiled from originally separate and specialised lists. Evidence supporting this can be seen, for instance, in St John's Ms 17, where separate lists are set out side by side. This makes it possible to read both down and across, in such a way that all types of information for each day can also be quickly seen if desired. Whether such collections formed a transitional stage in the evolution of lunaries is not clear; but their existence, together with the fact that many (though not all) compound lunaries include information about bloodletting, strongly suggests that whoever designed the Harley prognostic calendar chose not to offer specialised advice on this matter. However, as already

stated, perhaps the most surprising thing about this lunary is that it continues, apparently seamlessly, on folio 17v with day twenty-two – but in a late-fourteenth, or fifteenth-century hand. The same categories of information are given, although individual days are more clearly separated, and the text is more widely spaced. This continues to the end of the lunary, on folio 18r (line 15).

The same (or a very similar) late hand then continues with two short texts concerning the outcomes of illness. The first starts depressingly with the bald statement that someone who falls ill on a Saturday is most likely to die; however, recovery and convalescence are not entirely ruled out. Comparable details are given for illnesses beginning on each day of the week, ending with Friday at the bottom of folio 18v. The origins of this text are unknown but it was in circulation by the fifteenth century, and Thorndike and Kibre list two other copies of that date, both in collections of loosely medical and scientific materials.¹⁹ The volume now in the National-Bibliothek, Vienna, can be linked to Breslau and is datable to c. 1436. It is comparable to Harley 978 in having several prognostics aiming to predict the outcome of illness, and the *Saturni die* text is followed on folio 163r by a longer text promising to predict whether an individual will live or die. This one however is different from those in Harley 978.

The second short text is striking in the context of Harley 978 since it addresses those who wish to know the outcomes of illness for women as well as men. This is not a sophisticated text and does not compare well to the techniques of medical prognosis outlined in the late thirteenth century by expert physicians such as Bernard de Gordon. The procedure involves ascertaining important days, writing them down and making calculations based on the letters and numbers involved. The words ‘Christ, God, man’ are then to be repeated according to the outcome of the calculation. If the recitation concludes with ‘Christ’ then the patient will recover quickly. If it concludes with ‘God’ then recovery will be difficult. And if with ‘man’ then the patient will die.²⁰ This is a rare text and nothing exactly like it is listed in eTK [the online version of Lynn Thorndike and Pearl Kibre, *A Catalogue of Incipits of Scientific Writings in Latin* (Cambridge UP, 1963) and its supplements].²¹ The technique used, and the prognosis of whether a patient will recover or die and at what speed, are reminiscent of the

much more widely used prognostic known as the *Sphere of Apuleius* or *Sphere of Life and Death*.²² The latter had no explicitly Christian content and was potentially open to criticism on the grounds of superstition, whereas the procedure given in Harley 978 is very clearly Christian and perhaps more suitable for monastic use. It must be admitted however that it seems to have been nowhere near as popular as the pseudo-Apuleian version. Texts with comparable incipits, such as that recorded in the now-destroyed medical miscellany, once codex Hertensis 192, are written-out versions of the pseudo-Apuleian procedure.²³ Hertensis 192 was written in the eleventh or twelfth century and contained familiar texts on good and bad times for bloodletting according to the months of the year and the days of lunations. Interestingly it included the short text on the three perilous days which is found also in Harley 978 (including the warning against eating goose meat). Concern about attending on a female patient is suggested in the text on folio 88r, beginning *Ad mulierem qui non potest parere* but, although the procedure involves writing out a prayer, this is not a prognostic and is not comparable to the text in Harley 978.

Perhaps most puzzling about the late addition of these two unusual prognostics is the fact that they were entered into the Reading prognostic calendar after such a very long interval. This in itself, with the other late additions, suggests that the manuscript was still in use, and that users regarded all its contents as of ongoing interest. One possibility, as suggested above, is that new and well-regarded prognostics became available and this led to the decision to complete the abandoned lunary and to add the two new texts. The exemplar of the lunary was presumably still at hand, since the added portion is very similar in structure and coverage to the first portion. The volume was produced after the compilation of the Reading book list and thus does not appear there. Firm information on both its place in the Reading collections and its later history is lacking. As Christopher Hohler pointed out, it is likely that it remained at Reading and was given at the Dissolution into the hands of the Burdett family, from whom it passed in 1595 to Edward Lapworth, later a Professor of Medicine at Oxford.²⁴ What Lapworth thought of the medical and prognostic texts is not known but the volume was of sufficient interest to have been borrowed by Robert Cotton, who appears to have removed and kept a part of it.

Illness and its outcomes were still matters of concern at this date, and phlebotomy remained a central part of medical treatment. Of course, the sheer range of important texts contained in this manuscript is likely to have been the most important factor in its preservation. However, this analysis has sought to show that the collection of prognostics is of more interest than has previously been recognised.

Notes

- 1 Even Lynn Thorndike, who provided a fundamental survey of early-medieval prognostic texts, was scathing about them. See *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, vol. 1 (New York/London: Macmillan, 1923), pp. 672–91 and Appendix 1. The absence of comment on the prognostics in Harley 978 is found even in the more recent discussions of the manuscript, such as that in A. Taylor, *Textual Situations: Three Medieval Manuscripts and their Readers* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), pp. 76–136.
- 2 On prognostics in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts see: R. Liuzza, *Anglo-Saxon Prognostics: An Edition and Translation of Texts from London, British Library, MS Cotton Tiberius A iii* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2011); and L. Chardonnens, *Anglo-Saxon prognostics, 900–1100: Study and Texts* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).
- 3 A valuable collection of texts, with commentary, is given by Tony Hunt in his *Writing the Future: Prognostic Texts of Medieval England* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2013). This provides examples of texts in all three languages of medieval England.
- 4 For comments on the Goliardic verse see C. Hohler, ‘Reflections on some manuscripts containing polyphony’, *Journal of the Plainsong and Mediaeval Music Society*, 1 (1978), 2–38. For recent discussion on the collection of the works of Marie de France see R. Pickens, ‘Reading Harley 978: Marie de France in Context’ in K. Busby and C. Kleinhenz, eds., *Courtly Arts and the Arts of Courtliness* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2006), pp. 527–42.
- 5 http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Harley_MS_978
- 6 Digital images of selected folios of this Reading Psalter, including of the calendar, are available via the website of the Morgan Library at: <https://www.themorgan.org/manuscript/77043>
- 7 For discussion see Hohler, op cit. More recent discussion is provided by N. Losseff, ‘Wycombe, W. of (fl. c.1275)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National*

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- Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/60119>
- 8 The pioneering, and still helpful, study is R. Steele, 'Dies Aegyptiaci', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 12 (1919), Supplement, 108–21.
 - 9 For an overview of evidence on the Reading calendar see N. Morgan, 'The Calendar and Litany of Reading Abbey', *Reading Medieval Studies*, XLII (2016), 89–102.
 - 10 An early discussion of these and their function in calendars was given by F. P. Pickering, *The Calendar Pages of Medieval Service Books*, Reading Medieval Studies: Monograph 1 (Reading: Centre for Medieval Studies, 1980), pp. 9–10. For more analysis see C. P. Nothhaft, *Scandalous Error: Calendar Reform and Calendrical Astronomy in Medieval Europe*, (Oxford: University Press, 2018), chap. 2, esp. pp. 56–61.
 - 11 A transcription of the texts is also given by T. Hunt, *Writing the Future: Prognostic Texts of Medieval England*, (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2013), p. 363. No comment is given.
 - 12 Chardonnens, pp. 230–34.
 - 13 Hunt, pp. 229–42.
 - 14 *Ibid*, pp. 237–9.
 - 15 It is worth noting that this finding echoes the conclusions of L. Chardonnens and R. Liuzza in relation to prognostics in Anglo-Saxon manuscript contexts. See: L. Chardonnens, 'Appropriating Prognostics in Late Anglo-Saxon England: a Preliminary Source Study' in R. Bremmer and K. Dekker, eds., *Practice in Learning: The Transfer of Encyclopaedic Knowledge in the Early Middle Ages* (Paris/Leuven/Walpole MA, Peeters, 2010), 203–56; and R. Liuzza, 'What the Thunder Said: Anglo-Saxon Brontologies and the Problem of Sources', *Review of English Studies*, 55 (2004), 1–23.
 - 16 The manuscript has now been completely digitised and is available, with transcriptions and commentary online: <https://www.rochester cathedral.org/custumale> This replaces the old edition by John Thorpe, *Custumale Roffense* (1788) which omitted all mention of the prognostics.
 - 17 For images, transcriptions and discussion see the cited folios and commentary on F. Wallis' website, 'The Calendar and the Cloister': Oxford, St John's College MS 17. 2007. McGill University Library. Digital Collections Program. <http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/ms-17> (accessed April 6th, 2022)
 - 18 Lunaries have been increasingly studied. For examples in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts see Chardonnens, *Anglo-Saxon Prognostics*, pp. 393–465,

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- where six different types are distinguished. Post-Conquest examples in prose and verse are discussed in Hunt, op. cit., pp. 32–80 and 85–16. A wide-ranging discussion is given by I. Taavitsainen, *Middle English Lunaries: A Study of the Genre* (Helsinki: Société Néophilologique, 1988).
- 19 Vienna, National Bibliothek Hs 5512 has been digitised and can be viewed at:
https://search.onb.ac.at/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=ONB_alma21303556650003338&context=L&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&vid=ONB&lang=de_DE&search_scope=ONB_gesamtbestand&tab=default_tab&query=addsrcid,exact,AC13959165
- 20 I am extremely grateful to my colleague, Elizabeth Matthew, for her help in deciphering this text.
- 21 The website can be found at: <https://cctrl.umkc.edu/cgi-bin/search>
- 22 See J. Edge, "Licit medicine or 'Pythagorean necromancy'? The 'Sphere of Life and Death' in late medieval England." *Historical Research* 87.238 (2014), 611–32.
- 23 The text with incipit *si vis scire infirmus si victurus est* began on folio 91r. It explains how to allocate number values to significant letters and then how to derive a prognosis from this. There is no mention of recitation of divine names. See K. Sudhoff, 'Codex medicus Hertensis (Nr 192): Handschriftstudie', *Archiv für Geschichte der Medizin*, 10, (1917), 265–313.
- 24 Hohler, op cit, p.3.