THE THREE HOSTS OF DOOMSDAY
IN CELTIC AND OLD ENGLISH

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"BETTER to feel shame for your sins before one man now," runs an Old English maxim on making confession to a priest, "than to feel shame for them before God and all angels and all men and all devils at Doomsday." This formula has been analysed by Malcolm Godden, who speaks of a "peculiarly Anglo-Saxon character of the motif. Not only did it circulate widely in Old English writings, but the only two Latin works in which I have been able to find it were written by Anglo-Saxons —Alcuin and Boniface."[1] This view of Professor Godden's (and this view only) is criticized here. C. D. Wright has already shown that, far from being "peculiarly Anglo-Saxon," the formula has Irish origins, and what follows defines these more closely.

Fifteen Old English examples of the formula are known, none in a manuscript much predating 975. Seven of them, following the pattern "betere is ye yæt ∂e scamige nu beforan me anum, yonne eft on domes dæge beforan gode, and beforan eallum heofenwaran and eor∂waran and eac helwaran," occur in these texts:

(a) An *Ordo Confessionis*, found in three manuscripts (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, 190; Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 121; London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius A. iii), and associated with the Old English

Confessional and *Penitential* by pseudo-Egbert. Junius 121 is from Worcester, Tiberius A. iii from Canterbury.

(b) A short address for confessors in MS Tiberius A. iii.

(c) An address for a private confessor in part of a Salisbury pontifical (now BL, MS Cotton Tiberius C. i) copied at Sherborne.[2]

(d) An address to a congregation, also copied at Sherborne, in the same manuscript.[3]

(e) An address (now fire-damaged, but apparently taken from the Tiberius version of *a*) for confessors in the eleventh-century MS Cotton Galba A. xiv, probably from Winchester.

(f) Homily XXIX of Napier's edition of homilies ascribed to Wulfstan, from the eleventh-century Worcester manuscript, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Hatton 113.

(g) The third "Lambeth Homily" in London, Lambeth Palace Library, MS 487 (of *c.* 1200).

In a second group the motif is used not to give advice, but a warning. Ælfric foretells that the man refusing to make confession now, will at Doomsday feel shame before God and before his hosts of angels and before all men and before all devils ("ætforan his engla werodum, and ætforan eallum mannum, and ætforan eallum deoflum"); the man unable to confess sins now before one man, will be put to endless shame before heaven's inhabitants and earth's inhabitants and hell's inhabitants ("ætforan heofenwarum, and eor∂warum, and helwarum"). Examples of this occur in six texts:

(h) Ælfric's *De Penitentia*.[4]

(i) A copy of *h* (with the end of Blickling Homily X added) in CCCC MS 198.

(j) A quotation from *h* in Homily XII of Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*.

(k) Part of *j* added to a version of Ælfric's *Catholic Homily* (first series) on the paternoster in London, Lambeth Palace, MS 489 (an Exeter manuscript).

(l) A passage, like that in *h*, in Napier's Homily XLVI (in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 419, and Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 343).

(m) A passage in part identical to *l* in an interpolated version of Ælfric's *Catholic Homily* (second series) for the sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost in London, BL, Cotton Vitellius C. v.[5]

Passages on shame at Judgement occur in two other texts.

(n) Vercelli Homily VIII, where an allusion to the Three Hosts has apparently been cut from a passage otherwise close to *m*.

(o) The poem *Christ III* in the Exeter Book, at lines 1298-1305, where a reference to *Tha folc* seems to replace one to Three Hosts.[6]

At least five other Old English texts mention the Three Hosts of Doomsday with no allusion to shame.

(p) Napier homily XLIX (occurring as Blickling Homily IX, now almost entirely lost; Vercelli Homily X; and in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MSS 302 and 421; and Oxford, Bodleian Library, MSS Bodley 343 and Junius 85).

(q) Vercelli Homily IV.

(r) Blickling Homily VII.[7]

(s) The poem *Lord's Prayer II*, lines 93-95.[8]

(t) Wulfstan's homily on the Catholic Faith.[9]

The view of the theme as purely Anglo-Saxon has, as noted, been criticized by C. D. Wright, who quotes Hiberno-Latin and Irish references to the Three Hosts of Doomsday, and concludes that "the Anglo-Saxons learned the expression from the Irish, although the motif subsequently developed independently within the vernacular homilies."[10] The following takes this approach one step further.

The crucial text here is the pseudo-Isidorian *Liber de numeris*, an eighth-century work not to be confused with the seventh-century pseudo-Isidorian *Liber numerorum* (possibly of Irish provenance).[11] *Liber de numeris* is a Hiberno-Latin guide to scriptural and other themes which can be counted by a number from one to eight, such as the six ages of the world, the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the eight deadly sins. It has never been edited in full.[12] Its unpublished final part includes a statement: "Tres turme in iudicio erunt, .i. ualde boni, hoc sunt angeli et sancti: ualde mali, .i. demones et impii; nec ualde boni nec ualde mali, hii tales per ignem purgabuntur."[13] This, the earliest instance of the Three Hosts of Doomsday formula, reinforces Wright's arguments for the theme's Irish origins, even though he does not mention it.

The circulation of *Liber de numeris* proves that the Three Hosts of Doomsday motif achieved wide circulation in eighth-century Germany. The textual history of *Liber de numeris* is as follows. The oldest manuscript is Colmar, Bibliothèque Municipale, 39, from the monastery at Murbach eleven miles away. Dated *c.* 775, this copy of the text has many Irish palaeographical features. Its script has been located in Alsace or in the Lake

Constance region; the manuscript is in any case mentioned in a ninth-century Murbach library catalogue. There is a copy of Colmar MS 39 (probably a direct one) in Zurich, Zentralbibliothek, MS Car C. 123, of *c.* 800.[14]

Further evidence for diffusion of the Three Hosts motif comes from the Rhine, Danube, and Loire regions. *Liber de numeris* occurs in a part completed in that city in 805 of Cologne, Domkapitel, MS 83.[15] Slightly later is Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 14392, from Regensburg, of *c.* 825.[16] Orleans, Bibliothèque Municipale, MS 184 (161), of *c.* 800, contains *Liber de numeris* and *Liber de ortu et obitu patriarcharum*. Evidence from pen trials of neumes suggests Orleans 184 was at nearby Fleury in the ninth or tenth century; it was certainly there by the early eleventh.[17] Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica, MS Reg. lat. 199, of *c.* 1100 and obscure provenance, is the incomplete and unreliable source of the *Patrologia Latina* edition.[18] There is a late copy of *Liber de numeris* in Paris, Bibliothèque Ste-Geneviève, MS 208.[19]

The manuscripts reveal early diffusion of *Liber de numeris* in South Germany, the Rhineland, and perhaps the Loire valley. Later influence of the text is indicated by London, British Library, MS Royal 5 E. *VI,* f. 54, an English manuscript of the early twelfth century also containing the *Disputatio Iudei et Christiani* of Gilbert Crispin and *Elucidarium* of Honorius Augustodunensis.[20] This manuscript is the source of the quotation from *Liber de numeris* given above; the text occurs with other works of Honorius in London, BL, MS Royal 6 A. *XI,* a twelfth-century Rochester manuscript.[21] *Liber de numeris* is known to have remained popular in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century England.[22]

Liber de numeris was written about the middle of the eighth century, probably in the Salzburg circle of St Vergil (d. 784), by an unknown Irishman who also wrote *Liber de ortu et obitu patriarcharum*, modelled on an authentic work of St Isidore, *Liber de ortu et obitu patrum*.[23] An eighth-century Hiberno-German provenance for *Liber de numeris* and its reference to the Three Hosts accords with a first appearance of the "Anglo-Saxon" penitential theme in Anglo-Latin writing on the Continent (and not in England) between *c.* 792 and 804. In a letter of that date to Irish monks, Alcuin says that it is better to have a single confessor witness of one's sins, "quam spectare accusationem diabolicae fraudis ante Judicem omnium saeculorum et ante angelorum choros, et totius humani generis multitudinem."[24] The letter refers to an Irishman called Dungal, perhaps the recluse of this name at St Denis, Paris, consulted by Charlemagne about the

eclipses of 810, and founder of a famous school at Pavia about 825.[25] If the penitential phrase were of Irish origin, its appearance in a letter of Alcuin with strong Irish links would not be surprising.

Closer to the expression in *Liber de numeris* is one in a homily attributed to St Boniface (*c*. 675-754), declaring that it is better to confess sins to one man, "quam in illo tremendo judicio coram tribus familiis, coeli terraeque, et infernorum, publicari" and by them be lost for ever.[26] Godden accepts the attribution of the homily to Boniface ("two Latin works . . . written by Anglo-Saxons —Alcuin and Boniface"), though acknowledging that others have doubted its authenticity.

This homily is crucial for the history of the penitential motif. Its authenticity is scrutinized in a paper which Wright does not mention, but which again strengthens his arguments for the formula as Irish.[27] The homily exists in only one known early source: Paris, B. N., MS lat. 10741 (tenth century), where it is the fourth of fourteen sermons attributed to Boniface. Fragments of these sermons in Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica, MS. Reg. lat. 214, and Paris, B. N., MS nouv. acq. lat. 450, which are surviving parts of a manuscript of *c*. 900 dismembered in the eleventh century, prove the existence of another copy of the collection. In addition, homily four occurs in Vatican City, Bibl. Apost., MS Reg. lat. 457, written in the twelfth century, perhaps at Mainz. MS Reg. lat. 562 in the same library is a sixteenth-century copy of this. The sermon collection attributed to Boniface is otherwise known only from Paris, B. N., MS lat. 340 (twelfth century), where it appears in a recast and disordered form, no doubt due to accidents in the transmission of the text. These sermons did not have wide circulation, and there seems to be no evidence for their influence in England.

The fourteen sermons are not original compositions but the work of a compiler. They were composed not for liturgical purposes or as exegesis of the readings at mass, but to give a general account of Christian faith and practice. Nothing in their text links them with Boniface's mission, and they do not read as addresses to the newly-converted or baptized. Their manuscript tradition goes back no further than the mid-ninth century. Their appearance with a text on baptism of 811 or 812, perhaps added by the compiler himself, in B. N., MS lat. 10741 and the dismembered manuscript, suggests the collection may be little older than 850. Bouhot calls it a preacher's handbook, whose contents (which follow the canons of Carolingian synods) were placed under Boniface's patronage to enhance their authority. On Boniface's proposed authorship Bouhot remarks that its

defenders seek to link aspects of the saint's life with details of the sermons, "mais la banalité de ceux-ci et leur utilisation de sources nombreuses affaiblissent les rapprochements proposés."[28]

Bouhot's arguments for the date and the compilatory nature of the sermons receive support from another quarter. Sermon four contains the phrase "quam in illo tremendo judicio coram tribus familiis, coeli terraeque, et infernorum, publicari." As Wright points out, this is all but identical with a phrase in the Hiberno-Latin handbook *Catachesis Celtica* (perhaps of the ninth century), which speaks of Christ as "princeps familiae caeli et terrae et inferni," and of the woe at Doomsday for the wicked man "si prius ei non eueniat dies confessionis peccatorum suorum antequam exierit de corpore suo" when the Lord will pass judgement "coram tribus familiis caeli et terrae et inferni."[29] *Catachesis Celtica* survives only in Vatican City, Bibl. Apost., MS Reg. lat. 49, of Breton provenance.[30] Its contents display marked Irish characteristics, as well as evidence for contacts with Cornwall and Wales. The compiler of the pseudo-Boniface sermon must, therefore, have had access to a Celtic-Latin source closely related to *Catachesis Celtica*. Not only must belief in the sermon as the work of Boniface the Englishman thus be rejected, but the earliest full instance of the motif derives in part from a Hiberno-Latin text.

The theme of the Three Hosts at Doomsday occurs, then, in the eighth-century Hiberno-Latin *Liber de numeris* circulating in South Germany and beyond. It appears in the context of shame in a ninth-century homily by pseudo-Boniface, certainly of Continental provenance, which shares phrases with the Hiberno-Latin *Catachesis Celtica*. The theme of the Three Hosts of Doomsday is also common in Welsh vernacular texts up to the fourteenth century, and Irish ones to the seventeenth.[31] The evidence thus suggests that the penitential motif (frequent in late Old English texts) of shame before a confessor being better than shame before the three hosts of Doomsday was in fact devised either by an Irishman, or, less probably, a Continental scholar well-read in Hiberno-Latin. a

NOTES

1. Godden 1973: 238.

2. Ker 1959: 276.

3. Ker 1959: 279.

4. Thorpe 1843-6: 2.602, 604.

5. Pope 1967-8: 2.779; cf. Godden 1979: 271 n. 103-4.

6. Cook 1900: 49; Krapp and Dobbie 1936: 39.

7. Morris 1874: 83.

8. Dobbie 1942: 73.

9. Bethurum 1957: 162.

10. Wright 1989: 56-58.

11. On *Liber numerorum* see Aldhelm 1979: 32, 187 nn. 4, 5, 7, and Lapidge and Sharpe 1985: 332.

12. On *Liber de numeris*, incompletely edited in *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 83, cols. 1293-1302, see Díaz y Díaz 1959: 32-3; McNally 1961: 312-6; Dumville 1973: 314-5; Kelly 1976: 15; Lapidge and Sharpe 1985: 209; and Brunhölzl 1990-1: 1/1.227-8.

13. Lewis 1931: 139.

14. Lowe 1934-66: 6.15; McNally 1961: 312; 1965: 169.

15. Lowe 1934-66: 8.38; Stegmüller 1950-80: 3.476.

16. McNally 1961: 313.

17. Lowe 1934-66: 6.31; McNally 1965: 169; Parkes 1972: 213 n. 4. I thank John Edwards of Oxford for information on the Orleans manuscript.

18. McNally 1965: 169.

19. Stegmüller, 3.476.

20. Southern 1963: 90-1; Gibson 1978: 242. I thank G. C. G. Thomas of the National Library of Wales for information on this manuscript.

21. Ker 1964: 162 and McNamara 1975: 56.

22. Brunhölzl 1990-1: 1/1.228.

23. McNally 1965: 168-9; Dumville 1973: 314; Kelly 1976: 15.

24. Godden 1973: 235.

25. Lapidge and Sharpe 1985: 173.

26. Godden, 235-6.

27. Hauck 1887-1920: 1.446 n. 3; Bouhot 1980: 184-91.

28. Bouhot 1980: 191, n.50.

29. Wilmart 1933: 46, 110-11; Wright 1989: 56. Diarmuid Ó Laoghaire argues for this text's Irish provenance in *Ireland and Christendom: the Bible and the Missions*, ed. Próinséas Ní Chatháin and Michael Richter (Stuttgart, 1987), unseen by me.

30. Jackson 1953: 64; O'Dwyer 1981: 166-7; Lapidge and Sharpe 1985: 268.

31. Lewis 1931: 139-40; Wright 1989: 56-8; McKenna 1991: 104, 147, 189, 203.

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