

# Y1K: Did the Anglo-Saxons Really Dance the Apocalypse?

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In most instances, no definitive assessment can be made concerning the setting, the occasion, or the intended audience of the surviving Old English homiletic corpus. Most scholars would probably agree with Milton McC. Gatch that most of the homilies were written to be preached "to the people on Sundays or Feasts in a liturgical setting, most probably at the Mass" (*Preaching* 25). The approach of the year 1000 seems to have instigated a proliferation of apocalyptic sermons, and popular legend has it that the vast majority of people believed that the end of the world was near. However, I believe that the evidence will show that, while most sermons of the period were meant to be delivered *ad populum*, the apocalyptic sermons of Wulfstan, Ælfric, and the Vercelli and Blickling homilists could have a double function depending on the audience. Those apocalyptic sermons that were meant to be preached were intended to fulfill a traditional function; they served as admonition to a lay congregation and utilized the topos of the apocalypse to exhort the parishioners into reforming with the primary intention of saving souls. However, the apocalyptic tradition was also utilized as a vehicle for entertainment as an extension of the Germanic heroic tradition for those who read them—the preachers and those who collected the sermons. The apocalypse was an appropriate and an officially sanctioned means of imaginatively exploring some of the traditional elements of heroic literature.

The evidence of the surviving sermons which can be dated to the end of the first millennium indicates that this time period saw a rise in the number of sermons and homilies associated with eschatological concerns. Many scholars have seen in this what they consider to be genuine fear on behalf of contemporary preachers and their audiences. Popular legend has it that people were terrified that the end of the world was at hand. Heinrich von Sybel states:

As the first thousand years of our calendar drew to an end, in every land of Europe the people expected with certainty the destruction of the world. Some squandered their substance in riotous living, others bestowed it for the salvation of their souls on churches and convents, bewailing multitudes lay by day and by night about the altars, many looked with terror, yet most with a secret hope, for the conflagration of the earth and the falling of the heavens. (qtd. in Burr 429)

Most preachers however—at least those represented by Wulfstan and Ælfric as well as the Vercelli and Blickling homilists—do not seem too concerned with any imminent threat of extermination.

G. L. Burr examines this early urban legend and concludes that this interpretation offered by von Sybel and others is false. Burr identifies Joannes Tritemius, a fifteenth century German abbot, as the earliest recorder of this legend. Burr examines contemporary Anglo-Saxon records for evidence of terrified people and mass confusion and finds none. Indeed, the various Anglo-

Saxon chronicles of this period reveal many disasters, both natural and man-made, which could have been construed as signs of the advent of Last Times. One of the Abingdon chronicles, the British Museum Cotton Tiberius B. i., discusses a great famine in the year 976; it mentions a blood-red cloud which appeared several times at midnight in 979, often with the appearance of fire, only to vanish at dawn; it also mentions a great pestilence among cattle in 986. All of the chronicles mention the deaths of great men and repeated attacks by pirates and invaders. None of them, however, mentions any of the mass confusion, the panic, or the terror associated in popular legend with the advent of the millennium. Although it is inconclusive to argue from silence that ordinary people had no fear of impending doom, Burr solidifies this position by examining the method of reckoning time and arguing that people may not have even known that it *was* the millennium. The Christian calendar had not yet been adopted, and most ordinary people did not know what year it was. To compound this problem, there was an uncertainty on the part of ecclesiastics as whether to count the years of the millennium from Christ's Passion or the Incarnation. If the millennium is to be charted from the Incarnation, should the Incarnation be dated from the Conception or the Nativity? All in all, the situation was (is?) quite confusing.

If, then, the impending apocalypse was not foremost in the minds of everyone at this time as legend would have us believe, how can we account for the proliferation of apocalyptic sermons at this time? One obvious answer lies in the Benedictine Reformation, which, to some extent, had its roots in the reign of King Alfred. The state of learning rose and fell rapidly in the early Middle Ages. During the eighth century, due to the influence and prestige of men like Bede and Alcuin, England was respected for its learned men, but this was all to change. The Danish invasions of the ninth century destroyed the organization of the English church and monastic life in eastern England. Monasteries were sacked and libraries burned. During the latter part of his reign, Alfred was appalled by the decline of learning in England. Although he had to be constantly aware of the threat of war throughout his reign, he supported education reform, but it would take almost a hundred years and the emergence of a strong central figure like Dunstan, an ecclesiastic statesman with close political ties to the king, to instigate monastic reform in England during a period of relative tranquility.

Few monastic communities were established before 940, and the existing ones struggled to survive. In 940, King Edmund re-established a monastery at Glastonbury and put Dunstan at its head. For the next fifteen years, according to F. M. Stenton, Dunstan maintained the first organized community of monks to exist in England for two generations. This marked the beginning of an upswing which saw sixty houses established or revived between 940 and 1066. Dunstan was instrumental in directing this revival due to his position of favor in the court of King Edgar. When Edgar began his reign in 959, Dunstan forged a close alliance with him and became one of his chief advisors. In 960 Dunstan became Archbishop of Canterbury. From this position of power, along with Oswald and Æthelwold, the Bishops of Worcester and Winchester respectively, Dunstan was able to direct the revival and reformation of the monastic orders in England.

One of the outstanding effects of the movement has to be the impact it had on literature, especially in the vernacular. The spread of the monasteries throughout England produced a need for specialized texts containing the Offices proper, and scriptoria began to appear. Book production became an important function of the monasteries, and the English monks developed

quite a reputation for high quality work. The effects of the monastic revival in England were to be felt throughout the kingdom and cannot be measured in simple terms. Certainly the proliferation of Old English homiletic texts of all sorts during this period can be directly traced to this reformation; thus, it should not be surprising to find an increase of apocalyptic texts as well.

If homiletic texts of all sorts were flourishing, how can we account for the popularity of the apocalypse among preachers? If G. L. Burr is correct and there was no mass hysteria that the end of the world was fast approaching, what about the apocalypse was intriguing to the preachers? One thing that can be established is that most people believed that the apocalypse would happen, but no one knew when it would happen. Indeed, no less an authority than the Venerable Bede, following Augustine's lead, says that it will happen, but that only God knows the exact time. In the famous dating passage in Blickling X, in his exegesis of Acts 1.7, "Non est vestrem nosse tempora vel momenta quæ Pater posuit in sua potestate,"<sup>[1]</sup> the preacher tells us that "we leorniaþ þæt seo tid sie toþæs degol þæt nære næfre nænig toþæs halig mon on þissum middangearde, ne furþum nænig on heofenum þe þæt æfre wiste, hwonne he ure Drihten þisse worlde ende gesettan wolde on domes dæg, buton him Drihtne anum"<sup>[2]</sup> (*Blickling* 116-17).

What the preachers pointed out to their parishioners was that the time was drawing near. They pointed to topical events as indicators of the advent of Last Times. As Dorothy Bethurum states, "The acceleration of fear . . . which has often been noted as the year 1000 approached, was due, where it really existed, not so much to consideration of the calendar as to what seemed to be striking fulfillment of the signs that were to foretell the final Judgement" (Bethurum 278). Wulfstan, of course, is just such a preacher.

Wulfstan wrote five surviving eschatological sermons in addition to his more famous *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*. Bethurum argues that the themes and treatments in these sermons are the same so that each essentially represents another stage of revision. The last of these, the sermon "Secundum Marcum," is typical of such sermons. In it, Wulfstan states that now is the time of the apocalypse and that men need to recognize the signs. A thousand years have passed since Christ appeared and the Antichrist is near at hand. All things evil are thriving. Things grow weaker the longer they continue and the world grows worse. Antichrist will work wonders and deceive the people. The good will suffer, but if they endure and maintain God's law, they will be rewarded. Antichrist will be banished to hell. God will judge, and the righteous will take their place in heaven.

In the *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*, Wulfstan makes a more direct appeal based on the things he sees in England. Although written around 1014, well after the millennium, it opens with a reference to the Antichrist. Wulfstan enumerates the signs of Last Times that he sees around him: famine, bloodshed, pestilence, hatred, plundering, bad weather, injustice, disloyalty, and unnatural acts such as kinsman fighting kinsman. He thinks that these punishments are deserved and that the situation can only be overcome through God's grace, and he ends with an exhortation for his people to do what is right, to love God and obey His laws. Malcolm Godden argues that this late employment of the apocalyptic theme by preachers away from a traditional eschatological stance was a move intended as a political ploy. For Godden, the sermon functions as a political platform, as an exhortium for political reform.

However one views these late treatments of the apocalyptic theme, one can be sure of one thing. The Old English homilists utilized this theme because it was effective. The apocalypse is the perfect topos for a preacher to use to exhort his congregation to adapt their lives to the teaching of Christ. The threat of total extinction at the hands of an angry, omnipotent God is dramatic to say the least. The apocalypse is the great leveler. There are no issues of gender or class inherent in this type of discourse. All will be affected, and all must be prepared on that day. The apocalypse is an equal opportunity destroyer and as such is a powerful tool in the hands of a preacher addressing a lay audience. As the preacher of Blickling X says, "hwæt nu anra manna gehwylcne ic myngie & lære, ge weras ge wif, ge geonge ge ealde, ge snottre ge unwise, ge þa welegan ge þa þearfan"[3] (*Blickling* 106-7). The apocalypse does not discriminate; the beauty of a Judgment Day sermon is that it is all-inclusive. It covers every type of sin for all people, and it stresses the importance for salvation of always being prepared through confession and penance since all life is transitory and hastens to an end. The promise of a total reckoning on Judgment Day, when there is no place to hide and the sins one commits in life will be apparent to all, is frightening to an uneducated audience. The imagery associated with the Second Coming and the torments of hell is extremely effective in initiating reform of all sorts, both spiritual and political.

All of the homilists used powerful language in discussing the apocalypse. Ælfric, for example, tells us in his homily "The Second Sunday in the Lord's Nativity" that on Judgment Day a "heofonlic fyr ofergæd ealne middangeard mid anum bryne, and ða deadan arisað of heora byrgenum mid ðam fyre, and ða lybbendan beoð acwealde þurh ðæs fyres hætan, and ðærrihite eft ge-edcucode to ecum ðingum."[4] The righteous will be protected but whoever is unclean, "he gefret þæs fyres æðm and we ðonne ealle to ðam dom becumað."[5] We shall all be swept through the air to God where the righteous and unrighteous will be separated. The righteous will dwell in heaven with god and the impious will dwell "nahwar buton mid deofle on helle suslum"[6] (Thorpe 616-7). Ælfric tells us elsewhere that there is no release from the eternal fire[7] and that the fire burns and causes great pain but does not consume.[8]

The Vercelli homilies, while dealing with many of the same themes, utilize a tone different from Ælfric's or the Blickling homilies' tone. As Stanley B. Greenfield and Daniel G. Calder have pointed out:

The emphasis here is also on provoking an emotional response in the audience (or reader), but the Vercelli Homilies do not show the same compassion as their Blickling counterparts. Instead the compiler selected sermons with a harsher and more strident tone, pieces that would indeed strike genuine terror into the hearts of his listeners. (74)

Milton McC. Gatch explains that the compiler's "intentions are parenetic; his primary aim is moral teaching which will inspire repentance. From this concern to inspire repentance emerges his seeming preoccupation with the Last Things; and from his desire to inspire amendment of life derive his related sub-themes: the ascetic life and the contemplation of the Cross" ("Eschatology" 144). The horrors of death is a consistent and dominant subject, and the conflict of body and soul receives special attention and development, with many descriptions of punishments. In Vercelli X we are told that hell is "indescribable" but then the homilist, of course, proceeds to describe it. Gatch paraphrases, "A

devil describes to an anchorite the terrors of hell and the joys of heaven. After a concluding description of hell as a fantastically dreadful dog, the homilist reminds his hearers how hateful is hell and bids them do God's will so that they may dwell with him in his Kingdom" ("Eschatology" 149).

Coupled with this desire for the reform of their parishioners, however, is a desire for the excitement afforded the homilists by examining this theme. Milton McC. Gatch states:

. . . the apocalyptic picture of the great Judgment appealed to [early medieval theologians] as an appropriate extension of their own "heroic" picture of man's social nature and destiny. For just as the ideal hero led his followers to actual or to moral victory, whatever the cost, so also Christ, the proper Lord of all mankind, led his faithful retainers to the most decisive and inevitable of victories. (*Preaching* 61)

The preacher may have seen himself in a similar role as the leader of his own small flock fighting against the forces of evil. Thus the apocalyptic sermon becomes a pretext for exploring traditional heroic themes. That Anglo-Saxon monks read and relished heroic literature is evident in Alcuin's famous remonstrance to the monks at Lindisfarne in 797, "Quid Hinieldus cum Cristo? Angusta est domus: utrosque tenere non poterit. Non vult rex caelestis cum paganis et perditis nomine tenus regibus communionem habere"[9] (*Monumenta Germaniae* 183). Given this attitude, is it any wonder that these men felt the need to sublimate in religious themes their pleasure in heroic exploits? These men enjoyed reading about and discussing great heroes, and the apocalypse allows them to explore some of the same Germanic themes which appear in secular literature without fear of remonstrance. In Blickling X, the preacher relishes the description of God with his fiery sword, "se ælmihtiga God wille þisse worlde ende gewyricean & þonne he his byrnsweord getyhþ & þas world ealle þurhslyhþ & þa lichoman þurh sceoteþ & þysne middangeard tocleofeþ"[10] (*Blickling* 108-9). The anonymous sermon entitled "Induite uos Armatura Dei"[11] expands upon this heroic theme by setting up an army of Christian thegns, with the Holy Ghost and Christ as leaders, to combat the forces of evil represented in the devil, the earth, and the flesh. The Christian soldiers are to be outfitted with shield, helmet, habergeon, sword, spear, steed, two spurs, and a smart staff (*OE Homilies* 240). Likewise in Vercelli IV all are armed with swords and shields with which to fight the devil, and Blickling VII describes the movement of armies in heaven anticipating the final clash on Judgment Day.

This is the same attitude that Michael D. Cherniss discerns in Anglo-Saxon poets, what he calls a "double tradition, Christian and pre-Christian, of subject matter, concepts and motifs, which they inherit from the Germanic and Latin past" (Cherniss 9). Although not apocalyptic, we see the same principle at work in a poem like the *Exodus* in the Junius manuscript. This work is filled with heroic thegns in glorious war gear preparing for death and destruction. All of the Germanic heroic ideals are contained in this biblical *Beowulf*, and the zest and enthusiasm which this poet had for this type of literature is everywhere apparent. The same holds true for the sermons. The apocalyptic tradition of biblical exegesis touches almost every aspect of Old English literature. The vernacular literary culture of this period was the clergy, and as Gatch states, "Old English churchmen tended to see eschatological implications in almost every portion of the Christian tradition" ("Eschatology" 129). The apocalyptic tradition is rife in the poetry, from poems which deal exclusively with the theme such as *Judgment II* and *Christ III* to poems where the

apocalypse is briefly mentioned such as *Elene*. Just as the apocalyptic tradition permeates the Old English Christian poetry written by ecclesiastics, the heroic tradition also permeates the Old English homilies, most notably in the sermons dealing with the apocalypse.

Thus the apocalypse becomes a double-edged sword for the preachers, one which could be wielded for education or for entertainment. As Richard K. Emmerson and others have pointed out, the apocalyptic tradition informed much of the clergy's lives and thinking and is apparent in every facet of the culture, in the art as well as literature. The vernacular literary culture was created to reach an audience who knew no Latin, an audience who depended on the clergy for their guidance and salvation. The apocalyptic tradition reveals much about the attitudes, the likes and dislikes, the perspectives of that culture and those who preached in it.

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## Biographical Sketch

Clinton Atchley is an assistant professor in the Department of English and Foreign Languages. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Washington and is now in his first year at Henderson State University. He has presented many papers on various aspects of Old English and Middle English literature and culture. He is currently at work on an edition of *Jacob's Well*, a fifteenth century English vernacular sermon cycle.

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[1] "It is not yours to know the times and the seasons that the Father has put in his power."

[2] "We learn that the time is no secret that no man in this world, be he ever so holy, nor even in heaven, has ever known when our Lord shall decree this world's end on Doomsday, except our Lord alone."

[3] "I now admonish and exhort every man, both men and women, both young and old, both wise and unwise, both rich and poor."

[4] A "heavenly fire will pass over all the world with one burning, and the dead will arise from their graves with that fire, and the living will be slain by the fire's heat and straightways after requickenened to eternity."

[5] "He shall eat the fire's breath and we shall then all come to judgment."

[6] "Nowhere but with the devil in hell torments."

[7] "First Sunday in Lent."

[8] "St. Agnes."

[9] "What has Ingeld to do with Christ? Our house is not wide enough to hold both. The king of heaven wants nothing to do with damned pagans holding the title of king."

[10] "The Almighty God will bring this world to an end, and then he will draw out his fiery sword and smite all this world through and pierce the bodies, and cleave asunder this earth."

[11] "Put on the Armor of God."

