

## NOTES ON OLD ENGLISH CHARMS II

After my discussion of the Nine Herbs Charm and the magical remedy for a horse with a sprained leg in an earlier volume of this periodical<sup>1</sup>, I should like to comment on some other items in Grattan and Singer's standard edition of Old English *incantamenta*.

Grattan and Singer's No CLXXIII runs as follows<sup>2</sup>:

wið cyrnla: 'Arcus supe[r] assedit uirzo', cana bi[s]; 'lux' et 'ure', cana bi[s]; sin3 ðis niz3on siþan 7 'pater noster' VIII on anum berenan hlafe, 7 syle þan horse etan.

The purpose of the charm clearly emerges from *wið cyrnla* and from *þan horse* at the end: the text is intended to cure a horse afflicted with *cyrnla*, i.e. either "a hard growth in the flesh"<sup>3</sup>, or "a lymphatic gland". The latter meaning is favoured by Grattan and Singer since they precede their translation by the heading: "Christian charm for glands in horses", whereas Storms translates the opening words as: "Against kernels"<sup>4</sup>.

The charm itself is clearly corrupt and a satisfactory explanation has not yet been given.

It would seem, however, that valuable clues to its solution may be found in parallel charms in Middle English. Indeed, comparison of these with the Old English text just quoted proves beyond doubt that Grattan and Singer's interpretation of it, is not correct.

Before introducing some parallel texts, it is worthwhile to have a closer look at the charm as it is printed by Grattan and Singer. Three words have been emendated: the Ms. has *suped* which they changed to *super*; the words *cana bið* are twice changed to *cana bis*. These changes have the advantage of resulting in good Latin words, whereas to *suped* and *bið* no clear meaning can be attached and they are therefore probably corrupt.

The words: *Arcus super assedit uirzo* are translated by Grattan and Singer as: "Above the heavens sat a virgin" and *cana bis* is rendered as: "Sing twice". According to their translation also the words *lux* and *ure*, the latter of which is, we are informed in a footnote, a Hebrew synonym for Lat. *lux*, should be sung twice.

So far this interpretation seems very convincing although it is rather unusual in magical formulas that something is requested to be said or done twice and not the usual three, seven or nine times<sup>5</sup>. The next sentence in the charm, however, can hardly be said to fit in with the preceding two: "Sing this nine times and Paternoster nine time . . .".

The word "this" (*ðis*) obviously refers to what in the charm precedes, so that, in spite of the repeated request that the preceding words should be sung twice, it now appears that they are actually to be sung nine times, the usual magical number.

The OE sentence: *sin3 ðis niz3on siþan* sounds very familiar as it occurs in

many charms, so that it is beyond doubt correct as it stands. The same cannot be said of the *çana bis*. Not only is *bis* a very unusual number in charms, it is actually not in the MS. but the result of an editorial emendation. It is clear therefore that Grattan and Singer's attempt to clarify the meaning of *canabið* by changing it into *cana bis* is not satisfactory.

Once this is granted, one wonders whether the interpunction, added to the charm by the same editors in corroboration of their emendations, can possibly be correct. Indeed, in the editors' view the charm is divided into two distinct parts, which are separated from each other by the prescription "sing twice". Since this prescription turns out to be very questionable it would seem far more probable that the words: *Arcus super assedit uirzo canabið lux et ure canabið* are in fact part of only one formula which is to be sung nine times.

Some curiously similar charms from medieval English manuscripts, which throw new light on the Old English one under discussion, have hitherto not been connected with the *wid cyrnla*-charm.

The first parallel text has been printed by G. Henslow from a fourteenth-century manuscript in his possession<sup>6</sup>. It runs as follows:

*A charme for a womman þat trauelyt on childe.* Arcus forcior super nos sedebit semper Maria lux et hora sedule sedebit nator natoribus saxo silet memor esto et sic puer uel puella exit foras quum<sup>7</sup> Christus natus est nullum dolorem passus est venit homo fugit dolor Christus exquisitor adiuro te *virgam per patrem et filium et spiritum sanctum et habes potestatem commingendi*<sup>8</sup>.

The text goes on in Middle English to say that this charm is to be repeated three times. In a footnote Henslow tentatively suggests that in *adiuro te virgam*, the last word should be *virgum*, but the other parallels favour the reading in the manuscript.

A similar Latin charm with many minor divergencies has been edited by M.S. Ogden from a mid-fifteenth-century manuscript<sup>9</sup>. It is also intended to help a woman "trauelyng of childe" and the number of times it must be recited is also the same as above. This is the text:

Arcus forcium super nos sedebit, virgo Maria natabit, lux & hora sedule sedebit rubus rebus rarantibus natus nator natoribus saxo. Sic memor esto vt sit puer vt puella. Eius exijt foras mater, quam Christus natus est, nullum dolorem passa est. Venit homo, fugit dolor. Christus adiutor, adiuro te virga per Patrem & Filium & Spiritum Sanctum vt habes potestatem coniungendi.

A third version of this charm is found in British Library, MS. Sloane 2457, fol. 30<sup>v</sup>. Here too the fifteenth-century charm is intended "for child beryng":

Archus forcior super nos sedebit uirgo maria natabit lux et hora sedebit sedule nator natoribus saxo salet. Memor esto et sic puerilus<sup>10</sup> puella eius erit *fons quando* Christus natus est nullum dolorem passus est. Venit homo fugit dolor exit adquisitor. Adiuro te uirgo per patrem et filium et spiritum sanctum ut habes potestatem coniungendi.

This charm must be repeated three times and then the woman “schal haue child zif it is hir tyme in sothnesse”.

The opening words of these three late medieval charms are, of course, strikingly similar to *Arcus super assedit* in the OE charm. Since *super* is in all parallel texts, Grattan and Singer’s emendation is correct. Instead of *assedit*<sup>11</sup>, however, all parallel texts have *nos sedebit*, so that it is very likely that *as-* is corrupt for *nos*. On the other hand *sedit* may be preferred instead of *sedebit*, since the former suits the meaning of the context better, as we will see below.

The word *fortior* as a qualification of *Arcus* is not indispensable; it may well be a later addition.

It also appears that *uirgo canabið* may safely be corrected to *virgo natabit*: *c* and *t* are so similar in shape that they are often read the one for the other and *t* and *n* have been interchanged. All parallel texts further agree in interpreting *virgo* as referring to the virgin Mary. The *semper* in the first parallel, an adverb qualifying *sedebit*, is not essential to the meaning and may also be a later addition.

If my interpretation is correct, the word *Maria* stands completely isolated from the rest of the sentence. As the parallel texts all have *maria natabit*: this verb has in all probability been skipped accidentally by the scribe.

The words *lux et ure canabið* occur in the parallel texts as *lux et hora sedebit* with the verb preceded or followed by the adverb *sedule*, i.e. “diligently or sympathetically”. This adverb is balanced in the first parallel by *semper* but both these adverbs are in all probability due to a later amplification. From all parallels it appears that *ure* in the OE version is not the Hebrew word for *lux*, as was conjectured by Grattan and Singer, but a corrupt form of Latin *hora*. The occurrence of *cannabið* instead of *sedebit* may well be due to the influence of the first *canabið*.

At this point of the discussion it would appear that, in the light of the parallel texts, there can be no objection to emending the text of the OE charm as follows<sup>12</sup>:

Arcus super nos sedit, uir3o [Maria] natabit, lux et [h]ora sedebit.

These three sentences constitute one whole and as such make fairly good sense: Arcus has held us in his power; the virgin Mary will be born and from that hour onwards Arcus will no longer dominate us but the light will rule our destiny. From this free translation one has the impression that these sentences may well be the opening lines of a hymn in praise of the virgin Mary. It may be significant that the sentences are practically equal in length and rhyming:

Arcus super nos sedit  
virgo Maria natabit  
lux et hora sedebit

In medieval Latin texts the word *Arcus* has several meanings. One of these fits remarkably well into the context of the charm under discussion. This meaning is illustrated in the *Mittellateinisches Wörterbuch*<sup>13</sup> by the following quotation: *per arcum designatur potestas procul nocendi per insidias . . . et iterum per arcum notantur insidiae*. Since the great cunning one, the archenemy of mankind is the devil, it is no surprise to notice that in another quotation in the same dictionary, the last word in the sentence: *effugiat iaculamina prepetis arcus* is glossed: *Satane*.

Since Satan had mankind in his power up to the time when the birth of the holy Virgin started the process of salvation, referred to in the charm by the words *lux et hora*, the interpretation of *Arcus* as *Satan* is in keeping with the context.

In the Bible there are two passages in which *arcus* occurs in a text which has some resemblance to the opening words of the charm. The first is 1 Kings 2, 4: *Arcus fortium superatus est, et infirmi accinti sunt robore*, in which the word *fortium* also crops up. The other passage is St. John's *Apocalypse* 6,2. Here the first horseman is described as sitting with his threatening bow on a white horse, and the following comment is added: *et qui sedebat super illam habebat arcum*. Since the horseman symbolises one of the powers of evil, he may easily have become the symbol of the greatest evil of mankind, personified by the devil.

Although the incantation is used with the OE charm against a disease in a horse, the three parallel texts are intended for a woman "trauelyng of childe".

There is no way of determining whether the *Arcus* passage originally belonged to a horse charm and was later inserted into a charm for a woman's delivery or whether the opposite is more likely to have happened. The only point I should like to make is that in the parallels, the epic *Arcus* – introduction, followed by some words of uncertain meaning, is distinctly separated from what we may safely regard as the actual charm of confinement: *Sic memor . . . exijt foras mater . . . venit . . . homo . . .* This part is closely parallel to what is found in the majority of Latin charms for the same purpose<sup>14</sup>, but the opening words, the *Arcus*-passage is never met with. It is not improbable, therefore, that this passage did not originally belong to a charm for a woman's delivery.

The reason why it may have been added in later times to such a charm, may well have been the words *lux et hora*. These are, indeed, reminiscent of sentences in Latin charms for this purpose, such as: *Infans siue masculus siue femina, . . . exi foras, te vocat saluator ad lucem . . .*<sup>15</sup>.

Grattan and Singer's No. CLXVIII is a celestial letter<sup>16</sup>, brought to Rome by the angel, i.e. the archangel Michael<sup>17</sup>, in a period when people were sorely afflicted with dysentery. It should be written on a strip of parchment long enough to pass over a man's head so that it can be hung on his neck.

The letter consists of a number of words, beginning: “Ranmigan, adonai, eltheos, mur. O ineffabile.”, *etc.* Only a few make good sense.

A parallel text is found in British Library, Ms. Add. 39, 638. It is written on vellum and dates from the fifteenth century. It contains mainly prayers in Middle Dutch and was apparently ordered by a couple of Bruges in Flanders. Among these prayers there are also a few charms<sup>18</sup> and one of these (fol. 15<sup>r</sup>) is closely related to the Old English text under discussion.

This charm consists of three parts. In the first one is requested to recite *pater* and a *credo* while fasting and to say over the patient: *Christus vincit, Christus regnat, Christus imperat.*

When these preliminaries are over, one is invited in the second part to write a number of ‘names’ on a strip of parchment of sufficient length so that it may be put round the neck of the patient after it has been sewn in his underwear. Then the text continues as follows:

Dit es gheprouft ende waer vonden; dinghel van hemelricke brochtse te roome in eene grote steerfte ende ghafse den paeus te sinen groten versoucke ende narenstiger bede. Dit syn de woorden:

\*kaey vinghan adonay satheos mirre ineffabile omiginam ona animan misane dyas mode vnde memar gemasten orcamin sanguine berisone irritas venas cansi dulis feruor fixiantis siccat. fla fla gra gra frigela uirgum et siden benedicite dominus.

The third part is a charm in Middle Dutch which is also to be written on the same strip of parchment.

It is the second part which is of interest in connection with the Old English charm. This part consists of an introduction in which some information is given about the origin of the words, which the scribe then gives. The introductory part can be freely rendered thus:

This has been tried and found true; the angel of heaven brought them (i.e. the words) to Rome in an epidemic and gave them to the pope at his urgent request and insistent prayer. These are the words:

It appears from this introduction that the letter was brought by Michael, the archangel to the pope at a time when many people died, i.e. during an epidemic, the nature of which is not specifically mentioned. Since many prayers and charms in the manuscript are for the pestilence, however, it may be safely assumed that this is the epidemic the scribe had in mind.

Since the Middle Dutch manuscript was written some four hundred years after the one in which the Old English celestial letter is found, it is no surprise to find that it is even more corrupt and unintelligible.

Cockayne has suggested<sup>19</sup> that the words *Ran migam adonai el* are Hebrew and should be translated as: “Shout, the Lord is my shield”. In the Middle Dutch version these words appear as: *Kaey vinghan adonay sa*. The next two words *theos mur* occur then as *theos mirre*.

It is not impossible that the late Middle Dutch text has preserved a few words which are closer to the original than the OE version. The Latin word *sanguine* (*sigmone* in the OE text) may well be a better reading, since the

immediately following passage is also in Latin and also mentions blood (*venas*).

The fifteenth-century Dutch text is a remarkably close parallel, the only one which has come to light up to the present day. It is very likely that the Dutch scribe borrowed the text from a lost Middle English version. This appears from the words *et siden* at the end of the letter. This is no doubt the Middle English *and sithen*, i.e. “then, afterwards”, which was left untranslated by the Dutch scribe. The last four words of the letter therefore probably do not belong to it: they require the prayer ‘benedicite dominus’ to be recited after the words have been written on the parchment.

It may be added that this is the second close parallel to an Old English charm which is found preserved in a fifteenth-century Dutch manuscript. The other one was first noticed by G. Storms<sup>20</sup> and is a late rendering of Grattan and Singer’s No-CLVIII, a charm against theft<sup>21</sup>.

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#### Notes

1. “Notes on Old English Charms”, *Neophilologus* LXIV (1980), 461-69.
2. J. H. G. Grattan and Ch. Singer, *Anglo-Saxon Magic and Medicine* (London, 1952), p. 192.
3. W. Bonser, *The Medical Background of Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 1963), p. 379.
4. G. Storms, *Anglo-Saxon Magic* (The Hague, 1948), p. 308.
5. In fact there is no other example in Anglo-Saxon magic of the use of the number two (cf. G. Storms, *Op. cit.*, pp. 96-97).
6. G. Henslow, *Medical Works of the Fourteenth Century* (London, 1899), p. 32.
7. *quum*: the abbreviation mark after *qu* should be expanded as *ando*, i.e. *quando*.
8. *commingendi*: read: *coniungendi*.
9. M. S. Ogden, *The ‘Liber de Diversis Medicinis’*, E.E.T.S., o.s. no 207, (London, 1938), p. 56.
10. *puerilus*: corrupt for *puer uel*.
11. According to G. Storms, *Op. cit.*, p. 308, the MS has *asedit*.
12. Only additional letters and words have been put in square brackets.
13. *Mittellateinisches Wörterbuch* (München, 1967 ff.) I col. 908. Arcus is also a synonym of *Arcturus*, the stellar constellation, also known as the Great Bear. It is remarkable that this constellation is in Classical astrology regarded as a cause of death (Fr. Boll and C. Bezold, *Sternglaube und Sterndeutung* (Leipzig, 1931), p. 143).
14. See the charms quoted by A. Franz, *Die Kirchlichen Benediktionen im Mittelalter* (Freiburg, 1909), II, pp. 198-201.
15. A. Franz, *Op. cit.*, II, p. 199.
16. J. H. G. Grattan and C. Singer, *Op. cit.*, p. 188.
17. Not “an angel” as G. Storms, *Op. cit.*, p. 275 has it. Compare p. 273: “The archangel Michael is mentioned by name in some cases”.
18. Edited in my paper: “Enkele Zegeningen en krachtige gebeden in een Vlaams devotieboek uit de vijftiende Eeuw”, *Volkskunde* LXXIX (1978), 285-307.
19. T. O. Cockayne, *Leechdoms, Wortcunning and Starcraft of Early England* (London, 1864-66), III, p. 274.
20. G. Storms, *Op. cit.*, p. 213.
21. J. H. Grattan and C. Singer, *Op. cit.*, p. 182.