CHAPTER TWO

THE MANUSCRIPT CONTEXT

The extant English prognostics are found in manuscripts known principally for the various other genres they contain. Prognostics have thus been discovered in computi, in volumes on science or medicine, and in miscellanies which present a host of different text genres. I am not aware of any medieval manuscript containing prognostics only. Despite the large number of contexts possible, I argue that there are in fact just five contexts in which prognostics have been found:\(^1\) (1) in calendars; (2) in computi; (3) in medical sections;\(^2\) (4) as guest texts; and (5) collected in prognostic sections.\(^3\) Moreover, prognostics are sometimes transmitted in fixed series. I present three such sequences for analysis.

This chapter is the first of four contextual studies of the prognostics: the others pertain to the language, date and place of origin (chapter three), superstition and prognostication (chapter four), and the intended use of the Anglo-Saxon prognostics (chapter five). A footnote at the head of each section lists the manuscripts under discussion. Descriptions of the date, origin and contents of each manuscript discussed in this chapter, as well as a detailed survey of the prognostics, have been provided in appendix one. A condensed reference list to the prognostic corpus is provided in appendix two.

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\(^1\) I acknowledge the risk of simplification by fitting prognostics into particular contexts, but I have yet to meet a situation where my method causes inconsistencies.

\(^2\) I am indebted to the following scholars, whose works have been very helpful in shaping my thoughts for the sections on calendars, computus and medicine: Henel (1934a), Hollis and Wright (1992), Cameron (1993), Borst (1993), Baker and Lapidge (1995), Stevens (1995), Wallis (1995; 1999), Hollis (2001), D’Aronco (2005; 2007).

\(^3\) The word ‘section’ is here not used in a codicological sense. A section should be understood as a grouping of texts which bear a thematic relationship. Thus, a prognostic section is a unit predominantly composed of prognostics, while a medical section is a unit of medical texts. I call these sections because more often than not they reflect thematic divisions of manuscripts containing several units of thematically linked texts, i.e. consisting of more than one section. A psalter, for instance, may be preceded by a computus, e.g. CCCC 391. Likewise, St. John’s College 17 consists of a medical section (fols 1-2), a computus (fols 3-174), and yet another medical section (fols 175-177). By ‘section’, then, I refer to thematic units, not to the entire contents of a manuscript.
CHAPTER TWO

MANUSCRIPT CONTEXTS

Calendars

Of the thirty-seven manuscripts which compose the prognostic corpus, twenty-three feature calendars with prognostic material. By prognostic material is understood the incorporation of prognostic data in calendars, in contrast to stand-alone prognostics. Egyptian Days, for instance, have been attested as independent texts but also feature as entries in the calendar, where they are mentioned as “dies egyptiacus”, “dies mala”, “dies”, “d eg”, “d m”, “d”, etc. Prognostic material is of a more hermetic nature than stand-alone prognostics because the prospective user will have to be able to recognise the somewhat cryptic references and to interpret their meaning without the help of the explanatory notes often present in stand-alone texts. The scope of prognostic material is of necessity limited to those genres that use fixed dates: the Dog Days and the twenty-four Egyptian Days.

Easter tables, often accompanied by a calendar, form the core of the computus. The computus concerns itself with time reckoning, which is important for liturgical purposes. It is not surprising, then, that many of the calendars under discussion can be found in manuscripts of a religious nature. Twelve out of twenty-three manuscripts incorporate prognostic material in the calendar only, the remaining eleven have stand-alone prognostics in addition to prognostic material. Prognostic material in

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4 This section pertains to the calendars in CCCC 9, CCCC 422, CTC O. 7. 41, CTC R. 15. 32, CUL Kk. 5. 32, Add. 37517, Arundel 60, Arundel 155, Nero A. ii, Titus D. xxvii, Vitellius A. xii, Vitellius A. xviii, Vitellius E. xviii, Egerton 3314, Harley 863, Bodley 579, Digby 63, Douce 296, Hatton 113, St. John’s College 17, Reg. lat. 12, Rouen 274, Salisbury 150.

5 Many of the Anglo-Saxon calendars have been published in their entirety, see Hampson (1841: I.389-472), Wilson (1896: 9-20), Wildhagen (1921), Atkins (1928), Wormald (1934), Muir (1988: 3-14), Ginzell (1993: 91-102), and the facsimiles available on microfiche (Pulsiano and Doane 1994-).

6 The only other genres which assign fixed dates are the twelve Egyptian Days and the three miraculous birthdays. I do not know of any medieval calendars which incorporate the dates assigned in these prognostics, however. The unlucky days, a genre which shows some affinity with the twenty-four Egyptian Days though is not to be confused with the latter, uses dating by the age of the moon.

7 Wallis (1995: 106). The importance of the calendar and the Easter tables as two different ways of measuring time is discussed below.

8 See pp. 29-39 for more information on prognostics in the computus.