CHAPTER SIX

USING A SUNDIAL, UNDERSTANDING THE HEAVENS?

Who, then, were the people who wrote and read about the navicula, who used the instruments, and what did they use them for? It is likely, from the survival of smaller and larger versions, that the navicula might have been made for or owned by people with varying amounts of money to spend on a useful little sundial. And just as there is variation between the surviving naviculae, the surviving manuscripts were produced with varying degrees of luxury. None are among the world’s most beautiful gold-embossed codices, but the nicest navicula manuscripts are written in an even, neat, script, rubricated and usually with two- or three-line initials (for example, BL¹). At the other end of the spectrum are books, copied by someone for their own use, often written by an interested individual, on paper, with little decoration and sometimes no page ruling (for example, WO). These can tell us much about the social and intellectual contexts of the navicula, and who was interested in the instrument.

Just one copy of a text on the navicula is in a booklet that has no context at all: EM. Although Neil Ker catalogued it as belonging to the first part of the manuscript, it is in a different hand, in a separate quire of differently sized paper. So its modern context cannot be used to study the medieval place of the navicula. In addition, apart from a note at the end reading “Haull” there are no marginal notes that can help identify scribe, owners or readers.¹

For most of the surviving medieval navicula instruments the situation is similar. Their provenance has long been lost, or was never recorded. An exception to this is the navicula now at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, which was found in 1989, by two metal detectorists, near Sibton Abbey, Suffolk. Sibton was the site of a large

¹ See appendix 3. It is difficult to work out who ‘Haull’ was: there are a number of sixteenth-century members of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, with names similar to that, and because it is not known when the College acquired manuscript EM; it could equally well have been in another library or private collection when marked by Mr. Hall. See Venn and Venn, *Alumni Cantabrigenses*, for Anthony Hall (vol. 1 pt. 2, 284), Joseph Hall (vol. 1 pt. 2, 287), and Samuel Hall (vol. 1 pt. 2, 288).
Cistercian abbey, founded in 1150, which was, by the later Middle Ages, a powerful and wealthy house. At its dissolution in 1536, Sibton reportedly had an income of £250 a year, in part from the wool trade. Some members of Cistercian communities studied at Oxford University, and there is evidence that some of these Cistercian monk-scholars had astronomical interests. However, the lack of detailed information about the archaeological context of the navicula means that it is difficult to tell when, and by whom, the instrument was lost or buried.

There is also evidence linking members of other religious orders to the navicula. A community of Austin Friars is linked both to astronomical instruments in general, and the navicula specifically, by references in manuscript AB. This contains the Middle English group D text on the construction of the navicula, and is loosely linked to the Austin Friary at Warrington by a marginal note giving the date of its foundation. Certainly, the manuscript was copied in that part of England, judging by the Chester dialect of the English, and the marginal notes relating to towns (including Chester) in that area. The manuscript contains, among other texts, a copy of Chaucer’s *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, texts on making the quadrant and a horizontal dial, a calendar with Easter dates, astrological texts and horoscopes, a zodiac man, a family tree showing Henry VI’s direct descent from the Kings of France, the arms of the kings of European countries, a text on the assize of bread, and a remedy for getting rid of fleas.

Stronger evidence, directly indicating the presence of a navicula, is given by a booklist from the Augustinian Abbey at Leicester, compiled between 1477 and 1494. It lists a navicula among a group of astronomical instruments, the phrase “per fratrem Charite” indicating that the instrument was acquired for the Abbey by brother William Charite, although it is not clear whether this indicates that he made, gave or bought the instrument.