The Fifteen Signs of Doomsday of the First Riestring Manuscript

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INTRODUCTION

The belief in the destruction of the world and of mankind has an ancient origin; it has a place in the great monotheistic religions. Christian eschatology also includes the second advent of Christ, or parousia, the resurrection of the dead and the Last Judgment.

In early medieval Europe, the growth of millennialist movements and chiliastic expectations fostered the rise of a literary tradition in which the interest in eschatological motifs found a large and fertile field of development. This particular cultural framework represents the background which gave origin – along with other literary expressions about the Final Judgment – to the legend of the Fifteen Signs before Doomsday, concerning wonders and fatal events, which are said to occur in the two weeks preceding the end of the world. The legend enjoyed a large circulation throughout the Middle

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3 The scholarly attention to the eschatological themes and particularly to the legend of the Signs before Doomsday began in the nineteenth century, when a number of significant essays were published. Among others: E. Sommer, ‘Die fünfzehn Zeichen des jüngsten Gerichtes’, ZfdA 3 (1843), 523–30, C. Michaelis, ‘Quindecim Signa ante Judicium’, Herrigs Archiv 46 (1870), 33–60, and, above all, G. Nölle, ‘Die Legende von den fünfzehn Zeichen vor dem jüngsten Gerichte’, BGdSL 6 (1879), 413–76, which offers the first systematic investigation of the legend and of its sources. G. Grau, Quellen
Ages, especially from the eleventh century onwards. Many versions are single, independent works and deal just with the Signs of Judgment; others are incorporated into longer eschatological works, in which – together with the Signs of Judgment – other events, such as the coming of the Antichrist, Christ’s return to the earth and the Last Judgment, are also described.

The Old Frisian version of the Fifteen Signs before Doomsday is preserved in Oldenburg, Niedersächsisches Staatsarchiv, Bestand 24-1, Ab. Nr. 2, the so-called First Riustring Manuscript, also known as the ‘Asega Book’, and compiled around 1300.4 The Old Frisian list of the Fifteen Signs was edited in 1840 by Karl von Richthofen with the title ‘Vom jüngsten Gerichte’.5 A century later, this text was examined by Buma in an article in which the Old Frisian version is accompanied by a Modern Dutch translation;6 later it was also included in Buma’s edition of the First Riustring Manuscript.7

In his article,8 Buma offers a brief excursus on the origin of the legend, with a short list of the vernacular versions. He points out that the Old Frisian text is based on the Pseudo-Bede version of the list, but follows the reversed order of signs twelve and thirteen as found in a version written by Petrus Comestor. The conclusion, written in ‘glowing words’ were added by the anonymous Frisian author. Buma refers to the known sources of the list, stressing the importance of IV Ezra, chapters 5 and 6. According to his description, the Old Frisian text is but a patchwork of several writers. On the other hand, the Old Frisian text, although based on a number of sources, is mostly indebted to one of them, but at the same time features a well contrived version of the list, with personal touches and a peculiar style in line with the Old Frisian tradition.

7 De Eerste Riustringer Codex, ed. Buma, 122–23.
8 Buma, ‘Geestelijke literatuur in Oud-Friesland’, 9–18.