The Southern Version of Cursor Mundi, Vol. V

Eldredge, Laurence M., Klinck, Anne L.

Published by University of Ottawa Press

Eldredge, Laurence M. and Anne L. Klinck.
The Southern Version of Cursor Mundi, Vol. V.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/6611

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=149094
extracts from the *Meditations on the Supper of Our Lord* and from the *Pricke of Conscience*. Robert Thornton, also writing in the mid-fifteenth century, copies the poem up to the story of Christ’s passion, but then abandons it in favour of the *Northern Passion*.

Even manuscripts which had been copied earlier were not immune from this sort of tinkering. During the fifteenth century, an owner of MS C removed part of the *CM*’s Passion story and substituted lines from the *Southern Passion* usually attached to the *South English Legendary*. In order to do this, he scraped off the text of fol. 93r and the first eight lines of fol. 93v col. 1 (ll. 16749–848). He then copied his preferred text, a pastiche of the *Southern Passion* and *CM*, on an inserted single leaf, fol. 92, on fol. 93r, and on the first eight lines of fol. 93v. On fol. 95v he again scraped off a portion of the *CM* text, the last 28 lines of col. 2 (ll. 17289–316). On the free space thus created he began to copy more of the pastiche. In order to continue his revisions, he then inserted three leaves, now fols. 96–97 (a bifolium) and 98 (a singleton with the stub of a cancellation visible before fol. 96). On fol. 98v he finished copying the pastiche and then recopied ll. 17289–316 of *CM*, which had been erased on fol. 95v.

The characteristic that all these insertions share is that they are considerably more affective than the original text of *CM*. They thus reflect a shift in public taste towards a more affective piety, a shift which is reflected elsewhere in the enormous popularity of the pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes vitae Christi*, among other texts.

**DATE, PROVENANCE, AND AUTHORSHIP**

The generally accepted date for the composition of the *CM* is 1275–1325, and I know of no evidence which would either specify the date more closely or call this into question.

The provenance of the poem has been more often discussed. Morris’ edition called *CM* simply a Northumbrian poem, but much early controversy centred around whether it was written in Scotland or northern England. This issue is much less burning than once it was, for Angus McIntosh’s researches into ME dialects have served to place the
dialect of the northern manuscripts of CM further south than earlier scholars had been inclined to believe. Whereas older scholars had held that MS C was copied in Durham and MS E even further north, McIntosh places both of these manuscripts in the West Riding of Yorkshire (McIntosh et al., 1: 259). The earlier controversy deserves to be reviewed, however.

Two kinds of evidence discussed were those of language and national feeling. Max Kaluza showed that some of the original text of the poem contained what he considered to be Scottish vocabulary. Rolf Kaiser continued this argument, producing a list of 50 words, including demonstrably original rhyme words, which he found elsewhere only in Scottish texts, a list which is still referred to (Kaiser, pp. 5–8).

Since these scholars wrote, however, many more ME texts have been unearthed and edited, and Kaiser’s list no longer has so much authority.

The question of nationalism was also much discussed. Otto Strandberg suggested that the emphasis on England in a passage in the prologue precluded the possibility that the writer could have been working in Scotland:

Efter haly kyrc state
Pis ilk bok is es translate
In to Inglis tong to rede
For the loue of inglis lede,
Inglis lede of Ingland,
For the commun at understand.
Frankis rimes here I readd,
Communlik in ilk[a] sted,
Mast es it wroght for frankis man:
Quat is for him na frankis can?
Of Ingland the nacion,
Es Inglis man þar in commun;
Þe speche þat man wit mast may spede,
Mast þar-wit to speke war nede;
Selden was for ani chance
Praised Inglis tong in france;
Giue we ilkan þare langage,
Me think we do þam non outrage.
To laud and Inglis man i spell
Pat understandes þat i tell. (MS C II. 231–50)

Because of these lines, he suggested Northumberland as the place of composition of the CM (Strandberg, p. xv).

Kaiser tried to refute the claims of nationalism by showing that the terms “English” and “Scottish” in the Middle Ages referred to the English language as opposed to Gaelic. This seems to be correct as far as language names are concerned, but he also attempted to show that all the territory south of the Clyde-Forth line was known as England. He demonstrated that Scotland was feudally subject to England after 1217, and that English influence was particularly strong after 1286, but he could not find any instance of a writer calling the territory between the Clyde-Forth and the present Scottish border “England.” He did point to Higden’s Polychronicon, which says that “Scotia” extends from the Clyde-Forth line to the Norwegian Sea, and he also showed that medieval Scots, like their modern descendants, made a distinction between those living north of the Clyde-Forth line and those living south of it.

However, since Kaiser wrote, careful research into Scottish history has shown that the boundary between England and Scotland was formally fixed in its present position by the Treaty of York in 1237. The treaty agreement merely confirmed a boundary which had come to be generally accepted in the east in the eleventh century and on the western side of Britain in the mid-twelfth century. The feudal relationship with England was also much less strong and far less well established than the English kings liked to claim. Furthermore, a conscious revival of nationalism in the mid-thirteenth century led to an even greater split. By the time Edward I invaded Scotland in 1296, already between the English-speaking Scot and the English-speaking Englishman, subjects of different kingdoms, a mental and emotional line of division was fixed which ran as clear as those ancient boundaries the Tweed and the Redden Burn. The idea of a contemporary Scottish poet insisting over and over that he was writing for the Englishmen of England is clearly impossible.
The poet's use of sources has important implications for an investigation of the provenance of the poem. The poet apparently had continuous access to books. Line-by-line comparison of the poem with its sources everywhere shows that he translated these texts directly, and did not rely on memory. He has the habit of interpolating a quotation from another work into the one he is currently translating, suggesting that he worked with several volumes open before him. Several texts are thus quoted at various places in the work: Herman de Valenciennes' Bible, the Trad. anon., Comestor's Historia scholastica, Honorius' Elucidarium, and to some extent De imagine mundi, the Latin Legende, Grossseteste's Château d'amour, and, of course, the Vulgate Bible.

The Latin works used by the poet, although numerous, are not especially rare or esoteric. A comparison of the major Latin sources of CM with R.M. Wilson's examination of surviving library catalogues indicates that the poet was using works which would have been found in many libraries of reasonable size (Wilson, pp. 85–111). French manuscripts are much less common, and would be much more helpful indicators of provenance. Unfortunately few such manuscripts survive and fewer still can be traced to specific medieval libraries.

No one can be sure how long the CM poet would have needed to spend with his books to produce the 25,000 lines which were probably in the original version of the poem. However, the translation of the Dialogues of St. Gregory into 24,000 lines of Anglo-Norman seems to have taken Angier seven years, and even Lydgate, at his supposed rate of composition of 5000 lines annually, would have taken at least five years to finish CM. Hence it is reasonable to suppose that the CM poet had fairly continuous access to a decent library over an extended period of time.

Another factor must influence the discussion of the provenance of CM. The conditions of the time in which the poem was composed have been largely ignored by scholars trying to determine its place of composition. Murray tacitly recognized the necessity of considering historical factors when he said the poem was composed "about 1275–1300 (while Alexander III reigned in Scotland)" (Murray, p. 30).

When Alexander III died in 1286, his only direct heir was his three-year-old granddaughter Margaret, daughter of the king of Norway. In spite of some disturbances in favour of other claimants to the
throne, six Guardians were appointed and, by the Treaty of Birgham, in 1290, Margaret was pledged to marry the son of the English king Edward I. On her way to her wedding, the Maid of Norway died at sea and the struggle for power in Scotland began in earnest. In 1295 the Scots made an alliance with France, and in March, 1296, the period known to Scottish historians as “The War of Independence” began. A Scottish army invaded north-western England and laid waste the northern counties as far as Hexham. Two days later, Edward I marched into eastern Scotland, slaughtered the male inhabitants of Berwick, and went on to subdue, temporarily, all of the country. By spring of 1297, most of Scotland was in revolt. Northumberland and Cumberland were raided again and the Northumberland clergy fled south to County Durham.

Although there were no doubt some periods of relative calm, it is estimated that in the 61 years between 1296 and 1357, 39 or 40 were marked by active warfare. The chronicles tell again and again of the northern clergy from all but the largest monasteries being scattered. Edward II’s preoccupation with his own troubles in the south left the north increasingly vulnerable, and the devastation in 1311, for instance, was appalling.

For a time the Scots could be bought off with money payments. County Durham did this eight times between 1311 and 1327, sometimes at a cost of one-third the annual value of lands, but the smaller counties were less well organized and suffered more from the raids. The records of Bolton Priory, of Lanercost, and of various other institutions tell of several occasions on which all their inhabitants had to be billeted in other houses, while the Scots raided and burned. Even in years when the Scots were not actively raiding, normal life was difficult because of the fear of the inhabitants that they would return.

As if the war were not enough, the harvests of 1315 and 1316 were a disaster because of torrential rain, causing a famine of major dimensions, which was accompanied by a virulent epidemic, and, in the following years, by a sheep and cattle plague (Prestwich, pp. 247-49).

Under these dreadful conditions someone sat, in a reasonably well-furnished library, over a number of years, composing CM. The only conclusion possible is that the poem is a product of one of the larg-