
Æcerbot

Introduction

This text is uniquely found in a manuscript that otherwise only contained the Low German *Heliand*, an alliterative synthesis of the four gospels. As it happens, synthesis is a concept very much applicable to the charm itself, as it patently employs Christian ritual for ends that Ælfric might not have approved of, venturing as it does into the realm of magic. It is important to recognize, however, that what may seem like blurred boundaries to the orthodox churchman might not have raised an eyebrow among much of the population: after all, the charm relies on the cooperation of a priest to bless the soil, and it invokes God and his saints in its effort to counter pagan witchcraft. What is more, asking a priest to bless the soil is hardly different from asking him to bless the season's first grain harvest, yet precisely that ritual became an annual celebration in the English Church in the form of Lammas (from OE *blāfmæsse* “bread mass”), an officially sanctioned feast not even Ælfric is known to have condemned.

Æcerbot is an especially rich specimen of the charm genre, combining agricultural and solar ritual with priestly blessing, Christian prayer with concepts reminiscent of a pagan “Mother Earth,” a herbal recipe with sympathetic magic, and appealing to the magical powers of the Latin language. Fertility is an especially rich soil for sympathetic magic, of course, and so a range of organisms are adduced in hopes that their capacity for growth may rub off on the soil.

Manuscript

London, British Library, MS Cotton Caligula A. vii, fols 176r–178r (s. x²)

Text

(1) Her ys seo bot hu ðu meht þine æceras betan gif hi nellap wel wexan (2) oþþe þær hwilc ungedefe þing on gedon bið on dry oððe on lyblace.

(3) Genim þonne on niht ær hyt dagige feower tyrf on feower healfa þæs landes, (4) and gemearca

hu hy ær stodon. (5) Nim þonne ele and hunig and beorman and ælces feos meolc þe on þæm lande sy, (6) and ælces treowcynnes dæl þe on þæm lande sy gewexen butan heardan beaman, (7) and ælcra namcūpre wyrte dæl butan glappan anon, (8) and do þonne halig wæter ðæron, (9) and drype þonne þriwa on þone staðol þara turfa, (10) and cweþe ðonne ðas word:

(11) *Crescite* (“wexe”) *et multiplicamini* (“and gemænigfealda”) *et replete* (“and gefylle”) *terram*¹ (“þas eorðan”). *In nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti sitis*² *benedicti*.

(12) And paternoster swa oft swa þæt oðer, (13) and bere siþþan ða turf to circean, (14) and mæssepreost asinge feower mæssan ofer þan turfon. (15) And wende man þæt grene to ðan weofode, (16) and siþþan gebringe man þa turf þær hi ær wæron, ær sunnan setlgange. (17) And hæbbe him geworht of cwicbeame feower Cristes mælo, (18) and awrite on ælcon ende “Matheus and Marcus, Lucas and Iohannes.” (19) Lege þæt Cristes mæl on þone pyt neoþewardne. Cweðe ðonne:

Crux Matheus; crux Marcus; crux Lucas; crux Sanctus Iohannes.

(20) Nim ðonne þa turf and sete ðær ufon on, (21) and cweþe ðonne nigon siþon þas word *Crescite*, (22) and swa oft paternoster, (23) and wende þe þonne eastweard and onlut nigon siðon eadmodlice, (24) and cweð þonne þas word:

Eastweard ic stande, arena ic me bidde.

Bidde ic þone mæran domine, bidde ðone miclan drihten,

bidde ic ðone haligan heofonrices weard.

Eorðan ic bidde and upheofon,

and ða soþan sancta Marian,

and heofones meht and heahreced,

þæt ic mote þis gealdor mid gife Drihtnes

toðum ontynan þurh trumne geþanc,

¹*MS* terre.

²*MS* sit.

aweccan þas wæstmas us to woruldnytte.
Gefylle þas foldan mid fæste geleafan,
wlitigigan þas wancgturf swa se witega cwæð
þæt se hæfde are on eorþrice
se þe ælmyssan dælde domlice drihtnes þances.

(25) Wende þe þonne .iii. sunganges. (26) Astrece þonne on andlang and arim þær letanias and cweðe þonne *Sanctus sanctus sanctus* oþ ende. (27) Sing þonne *Benedicite* aþenedon earmon, and *Magnificat*, and paternoster .iii., (28) and bebeod hit Criste and sancta Marian and þære halgan rode to lofe, (29) and to weorþinga and þam are þe þæt land age and eallon þam þe him underðeodde synt.

(30) Donne þæt eall sie gedon, þonne nime man uncuþ sæd æt ælmesmannum, (31) and selle him twa swylc swylce man æt him nime, (32) and gegaderie ealle his sulhgeteogo togædere. (33) Borige þonne on þam beame stor and finol and gehalgode sapan and gehalgod sealt. (34) Nim þonne þæt sæd, sete on þæs sules bodig. Cweð þonne:

Erce, erce, erce, eorþan modor,
geunne þe se alwalda, ece drihten,
æcera wexendra and wridendra,
eacniendra and elniendra,
scafta [hehra]³ [scira]⁴ wæstma, and þære bradan bere wæstma,
and þære hwitan hwæte wæstma,
and ealra eorþan wæstma.
Geunne him ece drihten
and his halige þe on eofonum synt
þæt hys yrþ si gefriþod wið ealra feonda gehwæne,
and heo si geborgen wið ealra bealwa gehwylc

³MS hen se.

⁴MS scire.

þara lyblaca geond land sawen.

Nu ic bidde ðone waldend, se ðe ðas woruld gesceop,
þæt ne sy nan to þæs cwidol wif, ne to þæs cræftig man,
þæt awendan ne mæge [word]⁵ þus gecwedene.

(35) Þonne man þa sulh forðdrife and þa forman furh onsceote, cweð þonne:

Hal wes þu folde, fira modor,
beo þu growende on Godes fæþme,
fodre gefylled, firum to nytte.

(36) Nim þonne ælces cynnes melo and abacæ man [innewerdre]⁶ handa bradnæ hlaf, (37) and gecned hine mid meolce and mid halig wætere and lecge under þa forman furh. Cweþe þonne:

Ful æcer fodres, fira cinne,
beorht blowende, þu gebletsod weorþ
þæs haligan noman þe ðas heofon gesceop
and ðas eorþan þe we on lifiaþ.
Se God se þas grundas geworhte
geunne us growende gife,
þæt us corna gehwylc cume to nytte.

(38) Cweð þonne .iii. *Crescite, in nomine patris sit benedicti, amen*, and paternoster þriwa.

Notes

7 **glæppe**: an unknown plant; bogbean (*Fieberklee*) has been suggested

17 **cwicheam**: rowan (mountain ash)

17 **Cristes mæl** (n): “mark of Christ,” i.e. cross, here in the plural (the normalized plural is “mælu”)

⁵MS woruld with *l* erased.

⁶MS innnewerdne.

-
- 21 þas word *Crescite*: note the plural; meant is the entire formula as previously given
- verse 1.1 arena: the genitive plural of *ār* “favour.” Verbs of asking take a genitive object of the thing requested.
- verse 1.7–8 þis gealdor ... tōðum ontȳnan: *ontȳnan* means “open” or “reveal” and takes the accusative. Its object here is *galdor* “incantation”; presumably the role of the teeth (*tōþ*) is instrumental: “reveal this incantation by way of my teeth.”
- 25 sunganges: the genitive signals adverbial usage. The meaning is thus “clockwise” (the motion of the modern clock mimicking that of the sundial and thus of the sun), but it may additionally be taken to mean “360 degrees.”
- 27 aþenedon earmon: as may be seen from the illustrations in *MS Junius 11*, the posture associated with prayer was to hold one’s arms outstretched, the body mimicking the shape of a cross. The folding of hands was a later fashion, borrowed from feudal ritual.
- 33 stōr ... sealt: the nearest habitat of the *Boswellia* trees tapped for frankincense was the south Arabic peninsula. Salt likewise was an exotic luxury.
- verse 2.1 erce: this word is not understood, and may not have been meant to be understood; a Celtic origin has been suggested
- verse 2.10 efonum: if normalized, this form would read “hefonum.”
- 36 innewerdre handa bradnæ: as broad as the palm of your hand