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THE ENGLISH VERSIONS OF THE FRIDAY LEGEND: THREE AND TWELVE

The short texts dealing with the veneration of Friday were extremely popular from their first appearance (which, according to the manuscript evidence, may be dated to the eleventh century at the latest).¹ Due to their popularity, they are attested in such a great variety of forms that even the determining of recensions is not an easy task. Moreover, these texts occur in almost every European language, so every attempt to categorize and describe them is faced with questions of intercultural and interlanguage interaction.

The aim of this article is twofold: on the one hand, we will focus on the English vernacular tradition until the sixteenth century, and will try to present all the available material, including unedited texts; on the other hand, the English evidence needs to be fitted into the general pattern, which requires providing parallels from other traditions.

The study of the Legend began in the late nineteenth century, when it drew the attention of such scholars as Alexander Veselovsky and Giovanni Mercati; their research was continued by Paul Fournier and, most notably, Walther Suchier, who has done much to collect and edit various versions of the text.² Then, scholarly interest faded, to rise again towards the end of the twentieth century, when considerable progress was achieved with the publication of texts newly found by Detlev Jasper, Britta Olrik Frederiksen, and Tomàs Martínez Romero.³ Since some English versions of the Legend were edited long ago and thereafter surprisingly dropped out of sight, it is our goal to bring their discussion up to date in the light of recent achievements. The edition of several texts not previously published should also add to the general picture.

The English material falls into two text groups which can be roughly described as ‘a list of Fridays’ and ‘a list of events’. The main and obligatory feature of the first type is a reference to several Fridays on which there should be strict

fasting. The two sub-types within this group can be labelled Three Fridays and Twelve Fridays texts respectively. The Three Fridays texts are usually very short, containing only the enumeration of these Fridays and the promise that anyone who observes them will avoid the fire of hell. The Twelve Fridays Legend has many versions, but in its most popular form it contains an introduction in which it is stated that fasting on the prescribed Twelve Fridays of the year was revealed by Christ to St Peter, who then taught it to his pupil St Clement of Rome. Then follows the list of the Twelve Fridays, and the text concludes with some rewards that fall to the faithful for the observance of these twelve fasts.

The second type, 'a list of events', concentrates on the prominence of Friday as the day of the week on which there occurred (or will occur) certain important events of biblical history. This type will not concern us here, and we refer the reader to the important study by Clare A. Lees.⁴

Three Fridays

There are five English texts:

1. London, British Library, Cotton MS Caligula A xv (Christ Church, Canterbury, s. xi², xi²-xi/xii), fol. 131^v (in part A, s. xi²);
2. London, British Library, Cotton MS Tiberius A. iii (Christ Church, Canterbury, s. xi^{med}), fol. 44^f;
3. London, British Library, Royal MS 2 B. V (the Regius Psalter, probably Winchester, s. x^{med}, xi; provenance Christ Church, Canterbury), fol. 196^v (written by a later hand of s. xi¹, perhaps, at Christ Church);
4. Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 422, part B (Red Book of Darley, probably Winchester, s. x^{med}, xi^{med}; provenance Sherborne), fol. 47^r (in part B of the MS, written in s. xi^{med});⁵
5. London, British Library, Harley MS 1025 (s. xv¹; provenance parish church of Hitchin, Herfordshire), fol. 186^r.

Three of these texts, namely Caligula A. xv, Tiberius A. iii, and Royal 2 B. V, were identified as variants of the same text by Max Förster,⁶ and the fourth was added by Heinrich Henel,⁷ who took into account all the previous studies; but the last, Harley 1025, has not, to our knowledge, been considered as part of the group. The texts are very short, and it is therefore appropriate to give them all in full, thus presenting all the available material:

*Caligula A. xv*⁸

Se æresta frigedæg þe man sceal fæsten is on hlydan. And se oþer is ær pentecosten. And se æresta þe bið on iulius. Se man þe þis gefæst ne þearf he him na ondrædan helle witan budan he beo hlafordswica.⁹

*Tiberius A. iii*¹⁰

De ieiunio

Þis syndon þa ðreo frige dagas þe man sceall fæsten on twelf monþum. se æresta

on hlydan 7 se nyhsta ær pentecosten 7 se æftresta þe byð on iulius. Se mann þe þis gefæst ne þearf he na ondrædon him helle wita butan he beo hlafordswica.¹¹

*Royal 2 B. V*¹²

þis syndan þa .III. frige dagas þe man sceal fæstan on twelf monþū. se æresta on hlydan 7 se nihsta ær pentecosten 7 se æresta þe byð on iulius. Se man þe þis gefæst ne þerf he na ...¹³

*CCCC 422*¹⁴

Ðis synd þa þry frigedagas þe man sceal fæstan on twelf monðum, ðonne ne cymð næfre his saul on helle:
þæt is se æresta frigedæg on kalendis Maius, and se oþer æfter PENTECOSTEN, and se þrida on kalenda iulius, þæt is se fyrmesta friedæg.¹⁵

*Harley 1025*¹⁶

This the rule of the iii Gyldyne fridaies; þe ffirst is þe last friday in March, þe Secunde is þe last friday in Jwnne, þe Thride is þe last friday in november; who so fasteth thes iii ffridays truly he schal never com in helle.

It is obvious that the first four texts should be grouped together since they share a number of features that distinguish them from the fifth text, Harley 1025. They were written down in the eleventh century, whereas Harley 1025 is of a much later date (s. xv¹). It is also worth noting that three of the texts (those in Caligula A. xv, Tiberius A. iii, Royal 2 B. V) are associated with Christ Church, Canterbury. Within this group, the texts of Caligula A. xv and Tiberius A. iii are very close to each other, and although the text of Royal 2 B. V is incomplete, we can reconstruct the words by analogy with the first two texts. All three promise to the faithful observer of the fast on these three Fridays in the year that he will not go into hell, unless he be a traitor.

There are, however, some differences in the list of Fridays that cause confusion and call for explanation. The most obvious correction is to read *Martius* instead of *Mainus* in CCCC 422, as suggested by the editor.¹⁷ This emendation seems to be beyond question, as *Mainus* has no support either in English or in any of the parallel European texts which we shall discuss later.

On the other hand, the other suggested emendations do not seem to be justified. First of all, the three copies give the second Friday as falling on the Friday 'before' (æŕ) Pentecost, while CCCC 422 has 'æfter PENTECOSTEN', and to this end Henel suggested that the reading of CCCC 422 is corrupt.¹⁸ Although this suggestion seems likely in view of the parallel text evidence (see Table 1), we have no means of knowing if this is a scribe's error or a reflection of actual variation.

Secondly, the most controversial item, giving room for multiple interpretations, is the Friday in July. Again, two manuscripts (Caligula A. xv and Royal 2 B. V) agree with each other completely in wording, cf. 'se æresta þe bið on iulius', but differ significantly from Tiberius A. iii which reads here 'se æftresta þe byð on iulius', and especially from CCCC 422 ('se þrida on kalenda iulius, þæt is se fyrmesta friedæg').

Heinrich Henel, following Napier, holds ‘æresta’ in Caligula A. xv and Royal 2 B. V to be a mistake for ‘æftresta’ preserved in Tiberius A. iii.¹⁹ But it is not altogether clear why ‘æftresta’ should be considered to be the original reading, and ‘æresta’ a corruption, especially since there is absolutely no supporting evidence in favour of either of these readings, and therefore the solution chosen by Napier and Henel seems to be rather subjective; moreover, it is quite possible to read ‘se æresta þe byð on iulius’ as ‘the first that is in July’. Further, Henel suggests that the scribe of CCCC 422 recognized the error, inserted ‘þridda’ instead of ‘æresta’, and marked it as the most important Friday fast (‘fyrresta’).²⁰ However, a different explanation can be put forward. Certainly, Henel is right in assuming that the scribe found the phrase confusing and tried to edit it in accordance with his understanding. Thus, he added ‘þridda’ in order to underline the text structure (‘æresta – nihsta/oper – þridda’), but as for the importance of this Friday, it seems that the word ‘fyrresta’ may have a different meaning here, consistent with the meaning implied by Caligula A. xv and Royal 2 B. V. As noted by Ferdinand von Mengden, Old English had some concurrent words for ‘first’, among them ‘ærest’ and ‘fyrrest’.²¹ Nevertheless, he pays special attention to the instance of CCCC 422 where these two lexemes co-occur (‘þæt is se æresta fringedæg on kalendis Maius, and se oper æfter PENTECOSTEN, and se þridda on kalenda iulius, þæt is se **fyrresta** friedæg’), supposing that here ‘the adjective *FYRMEST* is contrasted against the ordinal *ÆREST*, thus contrasting two different types of being “outstanding”, i.e. “most important” versus “earliest”’.²² But this instance can be explained differently, taking into account that ‘fyrrest’ may be interpreted here in its most common meaning ‘first’, which would be consistent with the evidence of Caligula A. xv and Royal 2 B. V, that is ‘and the third [Friday is] in the month of July, that is the first Friday [in July]’. This interpretation avoids the problem of ascribing different meanings to words securely attested as synonymous, and is in line with other attestations (Caligula A. xv and Royal 2 B. V) where the Friday in July is undoubtedly the *first* Friday in this month.

Lastly, the Harley 1025 Fridays cannot be considered as belonging to this group since this text gives the third Friday as ‘þe last friday in november’. We shall return to this text later when considering other European parallels.

The evidence presented above can be displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

Caligula A. xv	on hlydan	ær pentecosten	se æresta þe bið on iulius
Tiberius A. iii	on hlydan	ær pentecosten	se æftresta þe byð on iulius
Royal 2 B. V	on hlydan	ær pente costen	se æresta þe byð on iulius
CCCC 422	on kalendis Maius [=Martius]	æfter PENTECOSTEN	on kalenda iulius, þæt is se fyrresta friedæg
Harley 1025	last friday in March	last friday in Jwnne	last friday in November