Debby Banham

36 The Old English Monastic Sign Language

1 Basic facts about the language

Language name: Old English monastic sign list

Alternative names: *Monasteriales indicia*, Anglo-Saxon Monastic Sign Language

Location: England

Varieties: none; the text is only known from one manuscript

Number of signers: unknown; there is very limited evidence that the signs were used in practice

2 Origin and history

The Old English monastic sign list is found in an eleventh-century manuscript, British Library, Cotton Tiberius A. iii. Although the text has a garbled Latin heading, *Monasteriales indicia* ('monastic signs') the text is in Old English (sometimes known as Anglo-Saxon), the language of England up until the twelfth century. It represents a translation and adaptation of the sign language that had been used in reformed Benedictine monasteries in Frankish territories since the mid-tenth century. Although the manuscript comes from Canterbury, the only evidence for signs actually being used by English monks before the Norman Conquest comes from Winchester (see below). There is no reason to think that the list was in use outside monasteries, although it contains gestures, such as a finger to the lips for silence, that are still in use today, and presumably had a more general currency in Anglo-Saxon England. We do not know what signs, if any, were used by deaf people in the early middle ages; in fact, very little is known about the lives of deaf people at this time. The list could never have been used as a complete system of communication, as it has only 127 signs, nearly all for nouns. This would be an advantage for monks, who were supposed to avoid idle chatter, but would mean that users would need recourse to spoken or written language to supplement the signs.

Similarities between the signs used, and even the way they are described, make it clear that the Old English list depends on continental Latin lists, all stemming

Debby Banham, University of Cambridge, UK, e-mail: db116@cam.ac.uk

from signs used in the great reforming monastery of Cluny, probably from the time of Abbot Odo, 925–942 (the texts are edited by Jarecki 1981, and the tradition discussed by Bruce 2007). It was the reformers' rigorous interpretation of the Benedictine Rule, with its requirement for silence in church, in the refectory and at night, that meant they needed to communicate in signs. As other monasteries were reformed from Cluny, the use of signs was exported to the newly reformed communities, and the signs they used (a slightly different list in each case) recorded in writing. This seems to be what happened when the reform came to England in the later tenth century, too. The English reformers' closest links were with Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire (Fleury), but the Old English list does not show particular similarities with that from Fleury.

There is good evidence that signs were not used for functional communication in the pre-reform English Church. The Venerable Bede, living and working at that most Benedictine of the early Anglo-Saxon monasteries, Jarrow (Tyneside), in the eighth century, recommended signalling words and sentences, although only as a game or trick, by means of finger-counting (see below), converted into letters by reference to Greek alphabetical numerals, a cumbersome system that would never be used by someone familiar with even the few signs in the Old English list (see Banham 2006). Bede makes no mention of signs for whole words.

The *Monasteriales indicia*, explained as 'the signs that are to used in the monastery … where it is desired to keep silence according to the command of the Rule', are found in a manuscript (British Library, Cotton Tiberius A. iii) written at Canterbury in the mid-eleventh century. The contents of the manuscript are miscellaneous (although all ecclesiastical in one sense or another), but many of the texts relate to the tenth-century English reform (for a recent discussion of the manuscript, see Cooper 2006). There is, for instance, the *Regularis concordia*, the 'agreement about the rule' drawn up for English monasteries under the patronage of King Edgar (959–75), an Old English version of the Benedictine Rule, and a Colloquy for teaching Latin in monastic schools. The first two are the work of Æthelwold, the reformer who became bishop of Winchester in 963, and the third by his pupil Ælfric of Eynsham.

Æthelwold was the strictest of the three leaders of the English reform, and it is in the 'Life' of this bishop by his follower Wulfstan that we find the only evidence for the actual use of signs in pre-Conquest England. In this episode, a monk, whose name, Theodric, suggests he was from the Continent, comes to tell Æthelwold something urgent 'by means of signs', and rudely interrupts the bishop's reading. Unfortunately, it is not part of the story to tell us what the urgent matter was, or what signs were used. The point of bringing signs into the story may simply have been to demonstrate Æthelwold's devotion to the reform: he even understood the signs continental monks used (see Banham 2012 for further discussion of this episode). It is possible that the Old English list was produced under Æthelwold's aegis for the same purpose; the signs may not even have been in normal use at his own monasteries in Winchester.

3 Bilingualism and language contact

The Old English sign list must have been devised for speakers of Old English; the whole text is written in that language, but nearly all the signs appear to have been borrowed or adapted from the continental Latin lists. There is very little that is distinctively English about the list, except perhaps the selection of signs for food and clothing (see Banham 1996, notes to signs 57–60, etc.)

It appears that signs were taught in monastic schools (this may be why the *Indicia* and Ælfric's Colloquy are found in the same manuscript); the continental lists are in Latin, so Latin must have been taught first. But there is evidence that Latin knowledge was not as good in England, so it may have been necessary to teach the signs before the children had acquired Latin, hence the English list being in the vernacular. (In the twentieth century at St-Benoît-sur-Loire, boys entering the monastery were issued with a list in French, no doubt for the same reason.) It may even have been recognised that some English monks would never acquire a functional command of Latin.

If signs were in widespread use in religious houses, they would have provided a *lingua franca*, in addition to Latin, for monks or nuns with different native languages, as possibly in the story of Æthelwold and Theodric above. There are certainly 'regional' varieties of monastic sign language (although not from pre-Conquest England), but this may not be due to influence from local languages. Differences in monastic practice are a more likely explanation. Indeed, historians use similarities and differences between their sign lists to trace the relationships between reformed monasteries.

4 Political and social context

The manuscript context of the list, together with the story in the Life of Æthelwold, tell us a little about attitudes to sign language in England in the tenth and eleventh centuries: clearly it was associated with the reform movement, and particularly with the more rigorous wing of that movement. As we have seen, there is no evidence for knowledge of the list outside religious communities, and very few laypeople would have had sufficient education to read it. The English reforming movement in turn owed its origins to the reformed houses of Francia, and the sign list itself demonstrated those connections in the selection and description of its signs. The close association of the reforming movement with the monarchy, and the reformers' loyalty to King Edgar, whose support had brought them to power in the English Church, are also apparent from the list, with its signs for *king* (118) and *queen* (no. 119).

The existence of signs for *queen*, who is entrusted in the *Regularis concordia* with the protection of female religious, and for *nun* (no. 122) suggests that the list

was intended for use in nunneries, as well as male monasteries. However, there is no evidence, parallel to the episode in Æthelwold's Life, for the use of signs in a female house, nor that the signs existed in separate men's and women's varieties. The *Regularis concordia* requires nuns, as well as monks, to follow its provisions, but offers no adaptations for their needs. The implication is that abbesses were expected to make their own adjustments for female use, and this may have been true of the sign list, too.

5 The structure of signs

The shape made by the hand(s) is the main means of distinguishing one sign from another, as in that for *bread*: 'put your two thumbs together, and your two index fingers one against the other in front' (no. 54; the Latin description of the corresponding Cluny sign makes it clear that a circle should be the outcome).

The location of the hand(s) when making a sign is sometimes specified, presumably in relation to the torso: 'When you want a cup or a measure, put your hand down low, and spread out your fingers' (no. 79). For other signs it is necessary to touch something, such as the cowl in the sign for *monk* (no. 121), or point, as at the eyes in the sign for *schoolmaster* (no. 5). But frequently, no mention is made of location; presumably in these cases, as long as the correct shape was made with the hand(s), it did not matter where they were held. There seems to be no significance to the orientation of the hands in making the signs, except where this is integral to making the correct shape, as in the sign for *lid* (no. 80): 'lift up your left hand half closed, and likewise the right, and then curve it over the left'.

A number of the signs mimic the movement of the object indicated, such as that of a *fish* swimming (no. 70), 'move your hand in the way that it does its tail when it swims', or of its use, such as turning pages in the signs for books (nos 8–12, 29–33, 45–6), or manufacture, such as the use of a knife for *cooked vegetable dish* (no. 57), 'move your other hand downwards by the side [of the first], as if you were shredding vegetables'. Movement is also used in describing shapes, for instance to indicate the status of some of the persons in the final section of the list (see below).

6 Associated sign systems

As indicated above, the closest relations of the Old English monastic sign list are continental lists with the same function. Attempts have also been made (most convincingly by Barley 1974) to explore a relationship between the Old English sign list and the system of finger counting expounded in the Venerable Bede's *De temporum*

ratione (On the Reckoning of Time). However, Bede's finger counting was not original, but based on a text known as the *Supputatio Romana* ('Roman counting'), that probably originated in Ireland. Both the original and Bede's version were known on the Continent in the ninth century when monastic sign language was first used (as far as we know), but there is no evidence for influence from the one on the other. The *Supputatio* can only be used to represent words by transforming its number signs into letters and spelling out, as explained above, so none of its signs are comparable with those of the *Monasteriales indicia*. The Old English list does not provide signs for numbers, so we cannot tell whether its users would have followed the simple 'one finger, two fingers …' system we use today, or the more complex one suggested by Bede, which in theory allows one to count as far as a million.

There is good evidence that signs were used in English monasteries after the Norman Conquest, and a number of sign lists survive. There is just enough similarity between these and the Old English list to suggest a continuous English tradition, in writing and perhaps in use, rather than a wholly new introduction from the Continent. Of the four surviving lists from post-Conquest England, only that from Syon nunnery is in the vernacular, by then Middle English (edited by Aungier 1840: 405–409).

7 Basic morphology and lexicon

Of the 127 signs in the Old English list, the vast majority (120) represent nouns. A number of these stand for persons, either within the monastic community (nos 1–6: *abbot*, *dean*, *provost*, *cellarer*, *schoolmaster* and *sacrist*) or (mostly) outside (nos. 118–27: *king*, *queen*, *bishop*, *monk*, *nun*, *priest who is not a monk*, *deacon*, *celibate priest*, *layman* and *laywoman*). The rest stand for objects that Benedictines might need to refer to during the three periods of silence prescribed by their Rule: in church, at meals, and at night. There are thus a large number of books, as well as liturgical vessels and vestments, signs for food and drink, and the equipment for eating and drinking them, and for clothing and personal items such as sewing and writing tools, which may have been given out in the dormitory. The buildings represented include not only *church*, *refectory* and *dormitory* (nos 7, 49 and 87 respectively), but also *chapterhouse*, *privy*, *bathhouse* and *bakehouse* (nos 44, 94, 95 and 111).

Only four signs certainly stand for verbs: *ask permission to sit down*, *stand up* and *sit down* (nos 38, 39 and 40), the last two simply indicating upwards or downwards movement, while the first adds 'and ask permission with bowed head and put his hand to his chest', and *wash the hair* (no. 96): 'stroke with your flat hand on your hair, as if you were washing it'. Three more might be verbs: *refuse more*, *accept*, and *refuse* (nos 41–3), but they could also be interpreted as interjections (*no more*, *yes*, *no*): 'If any brother is offered more of anything, of which he has

enough, then turn his hand downwards, horizontally, and move it about slightly, stretched out,' 'If he wants what is offered, then turn his hand downwards on edge, and move it slightly towards him,' and 'If he does not want it, then again, let him move it slightly away.' Other verbs are implicit in the description of other signs, but are not listed in their own right: looking after, or overseeing, indicated by pointing at the eyes in the signs for the 'master, who looks after the children' and *sacrist*, who looks after the church (nos 5 and 6), as well as asking permission (no. 38) and asking forgiveness in the sign for *chapterhouse* (no. 44): 'put your hand on the front of your head and bow a little, as if you were asking forgiveness'. A number of the signs for nouns imitate an action, such as turning a key for *sacrist* (no. 6), or combing the hair for *comb* (no. 100), and thus might be used for that action as well.

There are also adjectives implied in signs for nouns: 'quiet' (or perhaps a verb, 'keep quiet'), indicated by a finger to the lips in the sign for *church* (no. 7), 'large', indicated by the thumb, for example in the sign for *tapers* (no. 25), 'small', indicated by the little finger, as in the sign for *schoolmaster* (no. 5), 'long', measured against the arm, as in the sign for *rectangular book* (no. 12), and 'sharp', shown by 'boring' into the palm of one hand with one finger of the other (nos 59, for *leek*, and 77, for *sloe*). The general sign for *book*, which is not listed separately, has to be deduced from the descriptions of signs for numerous individual types of book: *gradual* (containing liturgical texts), distinguished by a bent thumb for its musical notation (no. 8), for example, or *small martyrology*, indicated by drawing the finger across the throat and raising the little finger (no. 45). Other possible classifiers exist: the signs for *schoolmaster* and *sacrist* (both of whom 'look after') are distinguished by the sign for *small* in the master's case and *bell* in the sacrist's, but it is not clear whether they are envisaged as belonging to a more general class of 'lookers-after'.

Compounds: The sign for the schoolmaster can be seen as a true compound, being made up of the signs for *look* (after) and *small*, so that the whole would mean 'the one who looks after the little ones', whereas that for *sacrist* would only be a compound of the same type if it was interpreted as meaning 'the person who looks after the bell'. It is probably better understood as 'the person who looks after (the church) and rings the bell', a derivative referring to two of the sacrist's functions. The sign for *small martyrology* could be seen as a compound of the form 'book about death that is small', or all the signs for books, which consist of the general sign for *book*, followed by some kind of distinguishing feature, could be classed as derivatives.

Noun morphology: as well as those noun signs (many of them for persons) already mentioned which mimic actions, many describe the shape of objects, such as the eucharistic *wafer* (no. 21) or a *pear* (no. 74), or their materials, as in the sign for *pillow* (no. 90).

There appears to be no provision for signing personal names: there is a sign for 'any monk whose sign you do not know' (no. 121), but the individuals listed are indicated by their rank or office (*king*, no. 118, or *cellarer*, no. 4), rather than named. Many Old English personal names are made up of ordinary words (Æthelred means 'noble counsel', for instance), but the list does not have a large enough vocabulary to improvise them.

(A fuller semiotic discussion can be found in Conde-Silvestre 2001.)

8 Basic syntax

Since the list consists overwhelmingly of nouns, with very few adjectives or verbs, it can hardly be said to possess syntax, even to the extent that the Continental or later lists do. There is very little evidence for how signs might have been combined to form sentences, or even shorter syntactical units. Some of the signs are introduced in the text by such phrases as 'If you want …' (for example, no. 123, 'a priest who is not a monk') or 'If you need …' (such as no. 97, for *water*), suggesting that the signs for nouns were generally used in isolation, the syntactic context merely being implied. The compound signs, however, suggest an order placing a verb before its object (no. 5: 'look after the little ones'), as in Old English, but an adjective or other modifier after the noun it modifies (no. 45, combining signs for *book*, *death*, and *small*), which is opposite to the Old English order.

9 Interesting or unusual features

The Old English sign list is technically the oldest of the monastic sign language texts, but that is only an accident of manuscript survival. It is found in a book older than those that preserve the Cluny list, but this latter was undoubtedly composed before the English one, even though it was written down later. Historians of sign language as used by deaf people might be interested to know if there is any connection between the two types, but there is certainly no evidence for this from Anglo-Saxon England.

What does makes the Old English sign list valuable is the glimpse it gives of life within an English reformed monastery, offered by few other sources. One might, for instance, need *salt meat*, despite the Benedictine Rule's prohibition of quadruped flesh, but in a reformed house one needed a good reason to do so (no. 78). In an English monastery, *wine* was found in the church (no. 22), but not in the refectory, where the continental lists locate it. The range of fruits (*apples*, *pears*, *plums*, *cherries*, *sloes*, nos. 73–77) suggests that monks were pioneering horticulturalists, but the choice of vegetables was evidently quite small: the *leek* is the only one that

has its own sign (no. 59). English monks wore the fur-lined *pelisse* (no. 105), but apparently no tunic (which has a sign in the continental lists but not in the *Monasteriales indicia*). The Old English list is the only one of the early group to mention *soap* (no. 98), but one would hesitate to suggest that Anglo-Saxon monks' personal hygiene was better than in continental monasteries.

10 Examples of words and sentences

The sign for (lay)*man* is one of the few that is shared by monastic and modern sign languages: to translate the Old English: 'The sign for a layman is that you take hold of your chin with your whole hand, as if you were taking yourself by the beard' (no. 126). That for 'any woman not in orders' involves drawing the finger across the forehead to indicate her headband (no. 127). Interestingly, these are the last two signs in the list: laypeople below the rank of royalty are perhaps the individuals least likely to be encountered by users of monastic sign language, or least likely to be discussed. The signs for *monk* and *nun* (nos 121 and 2) also indicate their distinctive headgear, the cowl and the veil.

The signs for *accept* and *refuse* (nos 42 and 43, discussed above) may be construed as a more general 'yes' and 'no', although they are not described as such. There is no sign for human beings in general, or indeed for any non-human creature. Abstract nouns are extremely rare, and verbs, as mentioned above, scarcely less so. This is partly because the list is extremely short, even compared with the other monastic sign lists, and partly because it is limited to signs needed in a

Fig: nos 2 (schoolmaster) and 127 (woman).

monastery. Many items common in secular life are excluded as a result, and even items a monk might want to discuss would be considered outside the remit of legitimate conversation during the hours of silence. Thus we have no sign for *people*, *dog*, *bird*, *language*, *culture*, *speak*/*sign*, or *think*.

11 History of research

The sign list was first edited by Kluge (1885), but the appearance of his edition did not lead to a proliferation of publications concerning our text. Logeman (1899) added a few observations, followed at some length by Swaen (1920). After that, the Old English list was largely ignored, except for brief references in work on the Latin texts, until Nigel Barley compared it with Bede's finger counting (1974) and offered a couple of emendations (1977). Towards the end of the twentieth century, a rather more active period began, with David Sherlock's translation (1989), my edition (1990), and, more recently, Scott Bruce's book (2007), setting the Old English text in the context of the Latin genre, and my own article (2012) giving more of its historical context in late Anglo-Saxon England.

References

Aungier, G. J. 1840. *History and antiquities of Syon monastery*. London: J. B. Nichols and son.

Banham, Debby (ed. and trans). 1996. *'Monasteriales indicia': The Anglo-Saxon monastic sign language*, revised edition. Hockwold-cum-Wilton: Anglo-Saxon Books.

Banham, Debby (ed. and trans). 2006. The very useful and very accessible skill of bending the fingers: finger counting from Bede's *De temporum ratione*. In Anke Timmerman, Nick Jardine & Debby Banham (eds.), *The body as instrument*, 8–15. Cambridge: Whipple Museum.

Banham, Debby (ed. and trans). 2012. To keep silence following the Rule's command: Bishop Æthelwold, reforming ideology and communication by signs. In Alexander R. Rumble (ed.), *Leaders of the Anglo-Saxon Church: From Bede to Sigand*, 129–145. Woodbridge: Boydell.

Barley, Nigel. 1974. Two Anglo-Saxon sign systems compared. *Semiotica* 12, 326–327.

Barley, Nigel. 1977. Two emendations to the *Indicia monasterialia*. *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 79, 326–327.

Bruce, Scott G. 2007. *Silence and sign language in medieval monasticism: The Cluniac tradition c. 900–1200*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Conde-Silvestre, Juan C. 2001. The code and context of *Monasteriales indicia*: a semiotic analysis of the Anglo-Saxon monastic sign language. *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* 36, 145–169.

Cooper, Tracey-Anne. 2006. The homilies of a pragmatic archbishop's handbook in context: Cotton Tiberius A. iii. *Anglo-Norman Studies* 28, 47–64.

Jarecki, Walter. 1981. *Signa loquendi: die cluniacensischen Signa-Listen engeleitet und herausgegeben*. Baden-Baden: Koerner.

Kluge, F. 1885. Zur Geschichte der Zeichensprache. Angelsächsische *Indicia monasterialia*. *Techmers internationale Zeitschrift für allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft* 2, 116–140.

Lapidge, Michael & Michael Winterbottom (eds.). 1991. *Wulfstan of Winchester: The life of St. Æthelwold*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Logeman, Willem S. 1899. Zu den 'Indicia monasterialia'. *Englische Studien* 12, 305–307.
Sherlock, David. 1989. Anglo-Saxon monastic sign language at Christ Church, Canterbury. *Archaeologia Cantiana* 107, 1–27.
Swaen, A. E. H. 1920. Note on the Anglo-Saxon *Indicia monasterialia*. *Archiv* 140, 106–107.
Wallis, Faith (trans.). 1999. *Bede: The reckoning of time*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.