Cross And Cruciform
IN THE ANGLO-SAXON WORLD
Studies to Honor the Memory of Timothy Reuter

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Cross and Cruciform

in the Anglo-Saxon World

STUDIES TO HONOR THE MEMORY
OF TIMOTHY REUTER

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Signifying Christ in Anglo-Saxon England: Old English Terms for the Sign of the Cross

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At the end of his homily for the fifth Sunday in Lent, Ælfric summarizes the central properties of Christian worship of the cross. In a typological reading based on interpretations of the Fathers, 1 he contrasts the Old Testament Tree of Life, which brought death, with its New Testament counterpart, the "tree of redemption," which brought life and salvation. In a synopsis of Christian faith, he highlights the core elements of the Christian belief in salvation through Christ's sacrifice on the cross:

(i) Mine gebróðru uton behealdan þone ahangenan críst... Swa midel is betwix þære gehiwdan anliçnyse. and ðam soðan þinge... Þæ þreow us com dead. þa ða adam geæt þone forboden æppel, and þurh þreow us com eft lif. and alyséndnyse. ða ða críst hangode on rode for ure alyséndnyse; Þære halgan rode tacn. is ure bletsung. and to ðære rode we us gebidda ða swa þeah to ðam þreowe. ac to ðam ælmihtigum drijhte. ðæ on ðære halgan rode for us hangode. 2

1 This typological interpretation is, for instance, found in Hippolyt, Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine; see Godden I, p. 473.
2 Godden II, II, 136, homily 13, lines 277-94 ("Fifth Sunday in Lent"). Most of
[My brothers, let us behold the crucified Christ ... so great is the difference between the apparent likeness and the true thing. Through a tree death came to us when Adam ate the forbidden apple; and through a tree life came again to us and redemption when Christ hung on the rood for our redemption. The sign of the holy cross is our blessing and to the rood we pray, though not to the tree, but to the Almighty Lord who for us hung on the holy rood.]

At the beginning and the end of this passage, probably reflecting on practices in contemporary orthodox Christian worship, Ælfric stresses that the cross as a material object must not itself be an object of worship, and emphasizes that the cross is in its essence symbolic: one must not pray to a tree or a material object of any kind, but to “Christ who for us hung on the holy rood,” that is, to Christ himself in the culmination of his redemptive mission. In essence, the cross signifies Christ.

The cross is thus intrinsically a sign. And though cross-forms, i.e., two lines intersecting in one of the most basic of geometrical patterns, go back to a very remote period of human civilization and were used as symbols, religious or otherwise, long before the Christian era, the cross has unquestionably become the principal symbol and emblem of the Christian religion itself.

the translations in the present chapter basically follow the translations given in Thorpe, here p. 241; yet, some of the phrases have been changed to correspond to the findings of the present chapter.

3 See Lexikon des Mittelalters, 9 vols. (Stuttgart: Metzler, CD-ROM version, 2000), s.v. Kreuz/Kruzifix (various authors) and the detailed articles “The Archaeology of the Cross and Crucifix,” “The Cross and Crucifix in Liturgy,” and “Sign of the Cross” in The Catholic Encyclopedia, www.newadvent.org/cathen/c.h.htm. Most important and also influential for Christian faith are the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic symbol of life—the “ankh”—which was adopted and extensively used by Coptic Christians, and the “swastika,” which was marked on many early Christian tombs as a veiled symbol of the cross. For TAU as a precursor of the Christian tradition, see Bremmer, “Old English ‘Cross’ Words” in this volume, p. 205, and below, pp. 258–260.

4 The cross and its interpretation attest to the radical transformation of the image in the history of Christianity: the cross as an instrument of torture was replaced by the cross as a symbol of triumph. Jesus’s sacrifice on the cross has never been easy for believers expecting the triumphant Messiah, since crucifixion was reserved for slaves and common criminals in Roman law and was thus considered to be extremely degrading. Accordingly, Christians were at first very reticent about portraying the cross because too open a display of it might have exposed them to ridicule or even danger. The cross only became a popular symbol after Constantine converted to Christianity and abolished crucifixion as a death penalty. Pauline theology which interprets the crucifixion as “the paradox of the crucified Christ’s victory in defeat” (1 Corinthians 1:23–28; see also 2 Cor. 10:7–10; and 2 Cor. 12:9), is central for its positive understanding of the cross’s ambiguity. For Paul, the crucifixion is the perfect sign for a fundamentally paradoxical divinity—strong in its weakness, glorious in its ugliness. See also Robert Baldwin, “I slaughter Barbarians: Triumph as a Mode in Medieval Christian Art,” Kulturhistorisk Tidsskrift 59/4 (1990): 225–42.

5 Catholic Encyclopedia, s. v. “Sign of the Cross.”

6 For one of the earliest examples from the beginning of the third century,
in patristic literature. In idea, it is clearly associated with references in scripture, notably Ezekiel 9:4: “And the Lord said to him: Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem: and mark Thau upon the foreheads of the men that sigh, and mourn for all the abominations that are committed in the midst thereof.”

This little cross, the oldest variant of the manual gesture, is used as the fundamental ensign and symbol of Christianity and is thus traced on the forehead of the infant in baptism as a mark that the child is baptized in Christ:

(2) Mid þam haligan ele ge scylan þa hæðan cil mearcian on þam breoste and betwux þæm <gesculdu> on middeweardan mid rode tacne [2a], ærpanæc ge hit fullian on þam fantaætere. And þonne hit of þæm wætere cymæ, ge scylan wyrcan rode tacen [2b] upp on þæm hæfde mid þam haligan crisan.8

[With the holy oil you shall mark the heathen child on the breast and in the middle between the shoulders with the sign of the cross before you baptize it in the baptismal water. And when it has come out of the water, you shall trace the sign of the cross on the head with the holy chrism.]

see Tertullian (De corona militis 3:4, Tertullianus, Quintus, Septimius Florens: De corona, ed. Jacques Fontaine (Paris: Presses Université de France, 1966); “Ad omnem progressum atque promotum, ad omnem aditum et exitum, ad vestitum, ad calcitum, ad lauacra, ad mensas, ad lumina, ad cubilia, ad sedilia, quacumque nos conversatio exercet, frontem signaculo terimus,” (In all our travels and movements, in all our coming in and going out, in putting on our shoes, at the bath, at the table, in lighting our candles, in lying down, in sitting down, whatever employment occupies us, we mark our foreheads with the sign of the cross).


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Variant 2: Large Cross Traced from Shoulder to Shoulder

From the fourth or fifth century, we also find another variant of the sign of the cross as a performative manual gesture, namely a large cross traced from forehead to breast and from shoulder to shoulder. It is made today, for instance, by Catholics upon themselves when they begin their prayers or by the priest at the foot of the altar when he commences mass with the words: “In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti.” The pectorale (a large cross over the breast on the liturgical vestments) has become one of the emblems of bishops, derived from their wearing of a pectoral cross as a sign of their office, and the sign for the bishop in the Old English monastic sign list accordingly comprises this large sign of the cross: (3) “Biscopes tacen is þæt þu stricce mid þine hande ofer ædere eaxle niferweard ofer þine brest on rode tacne,” (The sign for the bishop is that you stroke with your hand over each shoulder down over your chest in the sign of the cross).

Variant 3: Blessing

The sign of the cross, as many quotations from the Fathers in the fourth century show, also passed very early on into a gesture of benediction. Thus another important variant of the sign of the cross is made in the air, mainly by bishops or priests (but usually people of authority), in blessing persons or material objects. Although this act in a Christian context always comprises the sign of the cross, this connection is not openly expressed in English (cf. Old English bletian, Present Day English “bless”).9 The Old English verb bletian generally used for this act is—like Old English rod “cross”—not

10 See the entries in the OED, s.v. “bless” and DOE, s.vv. bletian and gebletian, which establishes the central Old English meanings “to bless (1a. of God, Christ), (lb. of a bishop, priest, saint, etc.), (lc. of a parent)” and “to bless (ritually)” (2); other much less frequent meanings are “to praise, extol” (3), or “to be pleased” (4).
11 On the etymology and history of rod, see Rolf H. Bremmer, Jr’s “Old
found elsewhere in the Germanic languages: being—like red—of a somewhat uncertain etymology, the OED relates blestian to Old English blōd “blood,” so that its etymological meaning would be “to mark ... with blood; to consecrate.”12

The other Germanic languages do not use a native Germanic word, but choose a loan formed on Latin signare “to mark” (cf. signum “sign”). Thus we find the forms Old High German seganan, Old Frisian seininge, Old Saxon segnan, Old Norse signa: “to mark with the sign of the cross.”13 Only in the earliest of extant Anglo-Saxon witnesses, mainly in manuscripts of the translations of King Alfred’s circle, do we meet a loan Old English (ge)segnian.14 See, for instance, (4) “Segna þe & sete þe on þæt tacen þære halgan rode”15 (Bless yourself and set on yourself the mark of the holy cross). Segnian, however, is eventually ousted by the native formation blestian and is, for example, only rarely attested to in Ælfric’s writings.16

English ‘Cross’ Words” in this volume, above pp. 215–221.
12 See OED, s.v. “bless.” As an “equally satisfactory” suggestion, the OED mentions the derivation of blestian from blōt “sacrifice.” The derivation from blōd is favored by the OED because the form blōedian occurs earlier and because the change of ds to ts is seen to be phonetically natural in Germanic languages, while the reverse is not.
14 See BT, s.v. segnian. Old English is also special in that it not only borrows reflexes of Latin signum/signare in a Christian sense, but more often uses the noun to express the military meaning “sign; banner.” See Alfred Wellmann, Untersuchungen zu den frühen lateinischen Lehnwörtern im Alten englischen, Phonologie und Datierung, Texte und Untersuchungen zur Englischen Philologie 15 (Munich: Fink, 1990), pp. 297–323.
16 See, for example, the tautological phrase senian and blestian in “Mid brym fingrum man sceall senian and blestian for þære halgan þrynysse,” (With three fingers must a man make the sign and bless himself for the Holy Trinity), Skeat, II: 154, line 155 (“Exaltation of the Holy Cross”). Two further occurrences are attested to in Ælfric’s homily on Palm Sunday: “Eft swa gelice gelæht ænne calic. senede mid swiðran. and sealde his gingrum” (Afterwards in like manner he took a cup and blessed [Thorpe: signed] it with his right hand and gave it to his disciples) and “and he syðan senede husel, ” (and he then blessed [Thorpe: signed] the Eucharist), but they refer to Jesus’s blessing of wine and bread on the occasion of the Last Supper and therefore obviously cannot comprise the sign of the cross. See Godden II, p. 139, lines 50 and 66 (“Palm Sunday”; cf. Thorpe, p. 245).
17 Banham, Monasteriales Indicia, p. 24, no. 9.
19 BT, s.v. segnian, lists this as a separate meaning: “III. without reference to the sign of the cross.” The twenty-six occurrences with such a prepositional phrase are, however, only a small fraction of the total of about 1350 occurrences of the forms (ge)bletian and (ge)bletian in Old English; see DOE, s.v. blestian,
In the following quotation, it is used to specify the act in the first instance of *segian* in 7a: (7) "genom hine da bi his cinne & mid tæne ðære halgan rode hio gesegnade [7a]. Da he da hio gesegnado hæfe [7b], da hehte he... "w (He then took him by the chin and blessed him with the sign of the holy cross. Then, when he had blessed it, then he commanded...).

In these cases, the manual gesture of the sign of the cross involved in the act of blessing is spelled out verbally: (8) "ða com him to se costnerne; Witodlice an blac þroste;... ac he hine blestode mid þære halgan rodetacne. and se fugol sona aweg gewat,"π (then the tempter came to him... indeed, a black throstle... but he blessed him with the sign of the holy cross; and the bird instantly went away). It is again Ælfric who most explicitly summarizes the decisive aspects of the holy cross in its relation to the act of blessing. In his homily on the feast-day of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross he states:

(9) Is swa-þeah to witenne þæt heo [s the holy cross] is wide todealed mid gelomiclic ofeyrum to lande gehwilcum. ac seo gastlice getacenung is mid gode æfre a unbrosonigendlic. þeah þe se beam beo to-coruen. þæt heofonlice tacn þære halgan rode is ure guðfana wiþ þone gram-lican deofol. þonne we us blestiseað gebyldæ þurh god mid þære rode tace. and mid rihtum geleafan. þeah þe man waðige wundorlice mid handa ne bið hit blestung

(g)blesian.

20 The Old English Version of Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People, ed. Thomas Miller, 4 vols., EETS 95, 96, 110, 111 (London: Oxford University Press, 1890–1898, repr. 1959–63), I: 2 and 388, lines 25–26. Interestingly, Miller tries to resolve the loss of transparency in *segian* and translates both instances of *segian* by "make the sign of the cross." and then took him by the chin and made over it the sign of the holy cross. When he had thus made the sign of the cross over it... " (p. 389).

21 Godden II, ii, 93, homily 11, lines 45–49 ("The Feast of Saint Benedict the Abbot"); Thorpe renders *mid þære halgan rodetacne* as "with the holy sign of the cross," ii, 157.

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bute he wyrece tacn þære halgan rode. and se reða feond bǐ bмонтаж afyht for ðam sige-fæstan tacne. Mid þrym fingrum man sceall senian and blestian for þære halgan þrynysse.22

[It is, however, to wit that it [the cross] is widely distributed, by means of frequent sections, to every land. But the spiritual token (signification) is always with God, ever incorruptible, though the tree be cut in pieces. That heavenly sign of the Holy Rood is our banner against the fierce devil, when we bless ourselves boldly through God with the sign of the cross and with right belief. Though a man may wave about wonderfully with his hand, nevertheless it is not a blessing except he make the sign of the holy cross; and forthwith the fierce fiend will be terrified on account of the victorious token. With three fingers must a man make the sign and bless himself for the Holy Trinity.]

As we saw in the homily for the Fifth Sunday in Lent, Ælfric again highlights the difference between the material object and the cross as a symbol: while the actual instrument of torture, as well as its relics, are basically a tree which has been cut into pieces and has been widely distributed to every land, its spiritual signification is always incorruptible. One of the main functions of this sign—protection against the fierce devil—can only be fulfilled when we bless ourselves with the sign of the cross in the right belief. And so it seems necessary to Ælfric to point out that the act of blessing has to encompass the manual gesture of the sign of the cross: "þeah þe man waðige wundorlice mid handa ne bið hit blestung But he wyrece tacn þære halgan rode" (a man may wave about wonderfully with his hand, nevertheless it is not a blessing except he make the sign of the holy cross). Without the central symbol of Christianity—the sign of the cross—the act is no performative act, no blessing at all.

22 Skeat, ii, 152 and 154, lines 143–155 ("Exaltation of the Holy Cross").
old english terms for the sign of the cross: rode tacen, cristes mæl, (cruc)

These inherent properties of the cross as (a) a symbol representing Christ and, consequently, the salvation of mankind through Christ's sacrifice on the cross, and (b) a sign used in various concrete, manual gestures in specific liturgical and devotional contexts, are nicely mirrored in the Old English lexicon. Two Old English terms denoting the sign of the cross contain lexical elements designating “sign: tacen “token, sign” in rodetacen “sign of the cross,” and mæl “sign” in cristes mæl (and its variant cristelmael) “sign of Christ.”

First of all, it is intriguing that Old English should have two different terms for the concept “sign of the cross,” the central symbol of Christ and Christianity. The point of reference of these two forms, as can be seen at first glance, is entirely different: rodetacen “sign of the cross” refers to the instrument of crucifixion (rod “cross”) and requires a transfer from the material object to its symbolic meaning, Christ and salvation. The term cristes mæl “Christ's sign,” on the other hand, already refers to the central referent, Christ (and salvation), and thus calls for a “step-down” transfer to the material object, the cross.

Both rodetacen and cristes mæl, however, also pose another question. Modern German, a language typologically similar to Old English, differentiates between the syntactic group (das) Zeichen des Kreuzes (“sign of the cross”) and the lexicalized compound (das) Kreuzzeichen (“cross-sign”). While the first one generally refers to the cross as a symbol for Christ and Christianity, the lexicalized

23 For Old English expressions for “sign,” see Jane Roberts and Christian Kay, A Thesaurus of Old English in Two Volumes, (London: King's College, 1995; now also http://libra.england.arts.gla.ac.uk/othesaurus), 09.04.01. Beacen, another central Old English term meaning “sign,” is used in the figurative sigeadacen “sign of victory” (for sigeadacen denoting “cross”). OE mecra “mark, sign” is not employed for compounds denoting the “sign of the cross”; for the use of its derived verb mearcian, a frequent collocate with rodetacen, see below, pp. 252-255.

24 Accordingly, German dictionaries and encyclopedias list Kreuz (“cross”) and the compound Kreuzzeichen (“cross-sign”) in two separate entries. In the Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche, 11 vols. (Freiburg: Herder, 1993-2001, 3rd ed.) for example, the symbolic functions and art history of the cross are described in the headword Kreuz, while the headword Kreuzzeichen (“cross-sign”) is defined more specifically as “Zugehörigkeitszeichen zu Christus und spezifisch christliche Segensgeburde,” (sign of affiliation to Christ and specifically Christian gesture of blessing), s. v. Kreuzzeichen.

25 See BT and BTS, s.vv. rōd; see also MED, s.v. rōd (n. 5) and OED, s.v. “rood.” For more detailed information on the etymology and use of rod and its compounds and gealga, see Bremmer, “Old English 'Cross' Words” in this volume, above, pp. 215-220 and pp. 224-228.
the Latin word together with the new concept very early (i.e., in the eighth century) and create loans based on a late Latin form of *crucis*, *crucis* (see Old High German *kruci*, *kriuze*, Old Saxon *kriuo*, *kriose*),26 Old English employs the native word *rod*, whose original meaning "yard," however, is basically only attested in the compound *segli-rod* "sail-yard," a hapax legomenon (see BT, s.v. *rod* I) or in contexts referring to "a measure of land" (see BT, s.v. *rod* II).27 Denoting a material object, *rod* principally refers to the instrument of crucifixion, the cross on which Jesus was tortured and eventually killed, and also its relics (see BT[S], s.v. *rod* III). In order to separate the cross of Christ, which had by Anglo-Saxon times become the central symbol of Christianity, from the instrument of punishment on which criminals were tortured ("gibbet," "gallows") and which is thus only in very specific eschatological contexts an object of veneration, Old English uses the compound *wearg-rod* "the accursed tree, a gallows, gibbet"28 or chooses—like Old High German—an entirely different lexeme, namely OE *g(e)alga* "gallows," "gibbet" or more specifically "traverse; cross-beam."29

In addition to referring to the original instrument of crucifixion and its relics, *rod* designates a replica of the original instrument,30 i.e.,

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27 See also Bremner, "Old English 'Cross' Words," in this volume, above, pp. 215–218.
30 Among the oldest of these are processional crosses—commonly a staff surmounted by the figure of a cross (see OED, s.v. "cross" 6)—whose use seems to have been general in early times, since the Roman *ordines* suggest that one belonged to each church. Altar-crosses, on the other hand, can hardly be traced farther back than the thirteenth century.

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a model or figure of Christ's cross as a religious emblem, employed for ritual use (nowadays often called "crucifix").31 These models of Christ's cross may be found "in a church" (BTS, s.v. *rod* IV a), and the lexeme *rod* is accordingly used for the signs for a large or small cross in the Old English monastic sign list: (io) "Donne þu micelan rode abban wylle bonne lege þu þinne finger ofer þinne swyþran finger and rar up þinne þuman. Litelere rode tacen is ealswa rare up bonne litlan finger,"32 (When you want a large cross, then lay your finger over your right finger and hold up your thumb. The sign for a small cross is just the same; raise the little finger).

*Rod* may further denote a small-sized model of Christ's cross suspended from the neck (BTS, s.v. *rod*, IV c),33 but also a large-sized figure "out-of-doors" (BTS, s.v. *rod* IV b), i.e., "a monument in the form of a cross, or having a cross upon it, erected in places of resort, at crossways etc., for devotional purposes, or as a devout or solemn memorial of some event" (OED, s.v. "cross," 7). The term *rod* is thus used for the large stone crosses which were one of the distinctive features of Christianity in pre-Norman England,34 and is generally employed for all kinds of crosses set up as tokens and memorials—thus, for instance, in praise of God by King Oswald before his battle against Ceadwalla:

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31 The Present Day English term "crucifix" is ambiguous. In its technical sense, it is reserved for "an image or figure (formerly also a pictorial representation) of Christ upon the cross" (see OED, s.v. "crucifix," 2), though this distinction is not always drawn; see OED, same entry: "The misuse of crucifix for 'cross, figure of the cross,' is frequent in writers of the 18-19th c."
32 Banham, *Monasticæ Indicia*, p. 28, nos. 35 and 36.
33 For these, we also find the compounds *sweor-rod* "neck-cross" (cf. *sweora* "neck," see BT, s.v. *sweor-rod*) and the hapax *bisceop-rod* "bishop's pectoral cross or crosier" (see DOE, s.v. *bisceop-rod*).
(11) Oswold þa aræde ane rode sona Gode to wuromynte ær þan þe he to ðam gewinne come, and clypode to his geferum, Utun feallan to ðære rode, and þone ælmihigian biddan þæt he us ahredde wið þone modigan feond þe us afyllan wile.\(^{35}\)

[Then Oswald raised a cross quickly to the honour of God before he came to battle, and cried to his companions, "Let us fall down before the cross, and pray the Almighty that he will save us against the proud enemy who desires to kill us."]

Words for the Sign of the Cross: Old English rodetac(e)n

OLD ENGLISH *RODE TACEN*: COMPOUND OR SYNTACTIC GROUP?
Similar to Old English *rod* for "cross," Old English *rodetacen*—a loan translation of Latin *signum crucis* (Christi)—is the most central, frequent, and versatile word signifying the different aspects and functions of the sign of the cross. In the Dictionary of Old English Corpus, the forms *rodetacen* and *rode tacen* are attested to 157 times.\(^{36}\) Yet in BT, the most comprehensive dictionary of Old English covering the letter *r*, *rodetacen* is not given a separate entry but is listed as one of the meanings of *rod* "cross," though with the

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35 Skeat, ii, 126, lines 17–21 ("Oswald"). The *vita* later refers to the healing powers of the cross (lines 30–32) and its moss (lines 36–39) and to the fact that it on wurðmynte stod "stood there for worship" (line 31).
36 See DOE: the spelling most frequently attested is *rodetacen* (117 occurrences) followed by *rodetac(e)n* with separation of determinant and determinatum (34 occurrences). Other attested spellings are *rodetaken* (4 occurrences in manuscript H of the translation of Gregory's *Dialogue*), *rodenacen* (1 occurrence in the "Life of Saint Margaret" in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 303) and *rodetacen* (1 occurrence in a Charter (S 427)). Charter and wills are quoted from the database Regesta Regum Anglorum at http://www.trin.cam.ac.uk/chartwern (S refers to the number in the Electronic Sawyer, an online version of the revised edition of Peter H. Sawyer, Anglo-Saxon Charters: an Annotated List and Bibliography (London: Royal Historical Society, 1968)).

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commentary: "*Rode tacen* seems hardly a compound to judge by the numerous phrases in which *röde* is qualified by an adjective or genitive, but may be such in instances like *He mearcode him on heafde halig rode-tacen.*"\(^{37}\)

The delimitation of syntactic groups (nominal head *tacen* preceded by a genitive modifier *rode*) and compounds (one single noun *rodetacen*) is notoriously difficult for Old English.\(^{38}\) Generally, the distinction between syntactic groups and compounds is based on certain kinds of "isolation" in the compound—orthographical, phonological, morphological, and/or semantic isolation. As criteria for this isolation, word division (orthography), stress pattern (two major stresses = syntactic group, one major stress = compound), morphological reasons, and semantic specification involving loss of transparency are considered to be decisive. It has been convincingly shown, however, that the stress pattern of Old English elements cannot be established from our extant sources, not even in poetry.\(^{39}\) The same is true for spelling, which was even more erratic in this respect than it is in Modern English. In the case of *rodetacen*, however, one might wonder whether the overwhelming preponderance of the single form *rodetacen* (123 occurrences)\(^{40}\) in contrast to *rode tacen*—with division of determinant and determinatum (34 occurrences)—might not be an indicator that Anglo-Saxon scribes took the *syntagm* as a compound. But an analysis of spelling with respect to word division is, of course, much impeded by editorial practices which are often oriented on the forms found in dictionaries.\(^{41}\)

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37 See BTS, s.v. *röd*, III (3).
40 Including the spellings *rodetaken*, *rodentacen* and *rodetacen*.
41 See, for instance, the remarks on the editorial procedure in the editions of
Thus morphological isolation remains as the most valid criterion to distinguish the compound from the corresponding syntactic group. In the case of genitive compounds,42 the whole noun phrase has to be inspected: if the article and/or adjective agree in morphological form with the determinatum (in our case the neuter *tacen*), we have a compound. If they refer to the determinatum (in our case the feminine *rod*), we have a syntactic group. Thus the feminine article *pare* in the first quotation of the paper from Ælfric, above,—"Dære halgan rode tacen is ure blestung"—estabishes the syntagm as a syntactic group, which is to be translated as "the sign of the holy cross is our blessing."43 Other instances of this use we have met so far are "Segna þe & sete þe on þæt tacen dære halgan rode" (quotation 4), "mid tacne dære halgan rode hio gesegnade" (quotation 7a), "ac he hine blestode mid pare halgan rode?acnac" (quotation 8), and "ne bið hit blestung buta he wyerce tacn pare halgan rode" (quotation 9).

By contrast, a neuter modifier is also attested throughout the Old English period. See, for instance, the second instance of *rodetacen* in the translation of Gregory’s *Dialogues*:

42 Both *rodetacen* and *cristes mat* are genitive compounds. As concerns *rodetacen*, OE *ród* is a feminine noun (*ó-declension*) and so the first component of a compound *rodetacen* – (rode) – can be seen as the genitive *röde*; Kastovsky, however, points out that in "a number of cases, e.g. *hildecilla* . . . the internal vowel should not be regarded as a genitive ending, but as a linking element like the German Fugen-s," (Kastovsky, "Semantics and Vocabulary," p. 363); see also pp. 369–370 commenting on *restedag* "rest-day, Sabbath," or *hellefyr* "hell-fire."

43 The weak adjective *halgan* is of no help here because weak adjectives are not inflected for gender in the oblique cases.

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(12) Eac he me sæde, þæt he mihte þis wundor wyrca, þæt in swa hwilere stowe swa he gemetne nœdran . . . þaet he hi acwealde sona gifi he hi gesegonde mid Cristes rodetacen [12a], swa þæt heo toborstenum þam innoðum swulte for þam mægne þære halgan rode, þonne se Godes wer þæt rodetacen awrat [12b] mid his finger.

[He also told me, that he was able to work this wonder, that in whichever place he met a serpent . . . that he killed it instantly if he blessed it with the sign of Christ’s cross [12a], so that it died from burst insides because of the power of the holy cross then, when the man of God wrote the cross-sign [12b] with his finger.]

While in the first instance (12a) the genitive modifier *Cristes* seems to indicate that the syntagm should be taken as a syntactic group (Latin *signum crucis Christi*, "the sign of the cross of Christ"), the neuter article *þæt* (instead of feminine *pare*) in the second instance *þæt rodetacen* (12b) shows that it is used as a compound.45

In its analysis of *rodetacen*, BTS implicitly also refers to this decisive factor for the differentiation between a syntactic group (German *Zeichen des Kreuzes*) and a compound (German *Kreuzzeichen*): the strong neuter adjective *halig* instead of the feminine *haligu*44 shows that the syntagm is considered to be a compound. So the passage should be taken as "... with the holy sign of the cross" and not "with the sign of the holy cross." The full text of this quotation from Ælfric

44 Hecht, Bischof Waerferths von Worcester Übersetzung der Dialoge Gregors des Grossen, ch. 35, pp. 246–47. Manuscript O does not give the compound form, but the syntactic group *dære halgan*.

45 For another of these occurrences of *þæt*, see "hi wæron gemetne on geleafan þæs lifigendan Godes suna, and his ðæt haligæ rode tacen on heora lichoman getrewlice berson" (they were modest in their faith in the son of the living God, and carried that (his) cross-sign [literal translation, U.L.] steadfastly on their bodies), translation mine: The Anonymous Old English Legend of the Seven Sleepers, ed. Hugh Magennis, Durham Medieval Texts 7 (Durham: Durham Medieval Texts, 1994), line 106.

runs as follows: (15) “and he awoc ða blīde. for ðære gesihðe. and for ðan behatenan sige. and mearcode him on heafde halig rodetacen,” and he awoke in a happy mood because of this vision and because of the promised victory, and traced on his head the holy sign of the cross.

This morphological means of delimitation by the different forms of modifiers seems fairly straightforward at first glance. A closer look at all the Old English occurrences reveals, however, that it is in fact only applicable in a very small number of cases.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modifier Type</th>
<th>.rodetacen (123 occ.)</th>
<th>.rode tacen (34 occ.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>without modifier /determiner</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determiner</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feminine (&gt; syntactic group)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neuter (&gt; compound)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjective</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feminine (&gt; syntactic group)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neuter (&gt; compound)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table shows that only about 15 percent of the attestations (24 occurrences) allow a precise morphological analysis with respect to grammatical gender. In about a third of all instances (49 occurrences), a morphological test is not applicable because the forms are used without any modifier.49

In about half of the cases (77 occurrences), rodetacen or rode tacen are modified by the genitive Cristes, yielding the form Cristes rodetacen,50 a phrase which explicitly relates the cross with Christ and thus further stresses the fact that the sign of the cross signifies Christ. BT take the many occurrences of the collocation Cristes rodetacen as an indicator that the syntagm was considered a syntactic group and not a compound, because Cristes is seen as modifying rod, i.e., “the sign of Christ’s cross.” As a loan translation of Latin signum crucis Christi, it is, however, such a frequent collocation in Old English that it seems possible to regard the whole phrase as a fixed expression for the specific concept “sign of the cross” with a first element Cristes, similar to cristes-boc “book containing all or part of the gospels” or cristes-mæsse “Christmas Day,”51 and in particular

47 Godden II, ii, 174, homily 18, lines 16–17 ("Invention of the Holy Cross"). Manuscript T has the variant þær halige, in which the neuter demonstrative þær stresses the grammatical gender neuter. For another use of the compound, see the version “he awoc þa blīplice for þære fægeran gesihðe and for þære mæran behatenan sige. and mearcode him on heafde halig rode tacen. and on his guðfanan gode to wyrðmynte,” (he then awoke blithely because of the fair sight and for the great promised victory; and he marked on his head and on his banner the holy cross-sign in honor to God), “Discovery of the Sacred Cross,” Legends of the Holy Rood, ed. Richard Morris, EETS o. s. 46 (London: Trübner, 1871), pp. 4–5.

48 Including the isolated attested spellings rodetaken, rodetacon etc. (see above, n. 36), all of which do not divide the determinant and the determinatum.

49 See quotations (2a), (2b) above and (16), (17) below.

50 See quotations (14), (15), (21) and (24) below.

51 See DOE, s.v. Cristes-boc and cristes-mæsse. For cristes-mæl, see below, pp. 261–270.
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act which, as shown above, has to be performed mid pære (halgan) rode tacne. Here again, the comparison with Modern German shows that the typologically similar language may use both forms, but would prefer the syntactic group when designating the act of blessing, probably for reasons of explicitness and intensity: “Ich segne Dich mit dem Zeichen des Kreuzes” (I bless you with the sign of the [holy] cross) is preferred to “Ich segne Dich mit dem (heiligen) Kreuzzeichen” (I bless you with the cross-sign). In more general contexts, however, Old English, like Modern German, uses (Cristes) rode tacen as a compound.

OLD ENGLISH RODE TACEN: SEMANTICS

Since the morphological analysis suggests a diversified use of the syntactic group (pære) rode tacen and the compound (pæt) rode tacen or Cristes rode tacen, the semantics of rode tacen will now be analyzed with respect to the question of semantic isolation or lexicalization. This survey account of the different meanings of rode tacen will then also provide the background for the following analysis of cristes mæl and cruc, both of which show some overlap with rode tacen in the referents they denote, i.e., are also Old English expressions for the “sign of the cross.”

When dealing with a historical period, it is not always easy to determine whether a given formation is lexicalized or not, in particular in a form like rode tacen which—in contrast to cristes mæl—has never adopted meanings that are not predictable from the meaning of the constituents and the pattern underlying the compound.

A survey of all the attestations to the forms rode tacen and rode tacen in Old English (here ordered by their relative frequency) establishes essentially four broad meanings:

52 Genitival modifiers can be placed before or after the head they modify: while the numbers are almost even for early texts (52% pre-posed vs. 48% post-posed around 900), there is a strong tendency for pre-position in late Old English (77% pre-posed vs. 22% post-posed in the eleventh century); see Manfred Görlich, Einführung in die englische Sprachgeschichte, 5th ed. (Heidelberg: Winter, 2002), p. 79.


54 See below, p. 262.

55 For this criterion of lexicalization, see Kastovsky, "Semantics and Vocabulary," p. 356.
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This survey shows that in most of the occurrences, rodetacen, as in Modern German, indeed refers to the oldest variant of the sign of the cross (Variant 1), i.e., the little sign of the cross traced as a performative manual gesture in the air or, more typically, on something specific (a person, an animal, a concrete object or such), most often on parts of the human body (A1) or written—in formulaic use—on (legal) documents (A2). The character of this tracing of the sign of the cross as an emblem is highlighted in the frequent collocation with the verb mearcian “to mark,” i.e., mearcian rodetacen or mearcian mid rodetacen “to mark (with) the sign of the cross.” This collocation is typically but not exclusively used in the writings of Ælfric.57

At all times, the Church has attributed to this mark not only effects of grace, but also of power against physical and spiritual destruction and death:

(55) And we sceilon mearcian ure foreweraerde heafod. and urne lichaman mid cristes rodetacen. þæt we beon ahredde fram forwyde. þonne we beoð gemearc pope ge on foranheafode. ge on heortan mid blode þære drihtenlican drowunge.58

[And we should mark our foreheads and our bodies with the sign of Christ’s rood, that we may be saved from destruction, when we are marked both on the forehead and on the heart with the blood of the divine Passion.]

mildheortha drihten geþafigen þe on hire self willes þrowode. and on þam rode tane eall mancyn alyde . . .” (but the merciful Lord would not permit that the cross on which he himself had willingly suffered and redeemed all mankind . . .): Morris, “Discovery of the Sacred Cross,” p. 17.

57 Mearcian is only rarely (ca. five times) used in the texts of the Alfred circle which commonly employ (a)uritan “write” (see DOE, s.v. uritan, A.8.a.). For more general references, Old English authors use the verb wyrcian “make.”

58 Godden II, ii, homily 15, p. 151, lines 55–60 (“On Easter Sunday”)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A) the little sign of the cross as a manual gesture (89 occ.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>~ a person, a part of the body (37 occ.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>~ an animal (6 occ.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>~ a concrete object (door, loaf of bread; 11 occ.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2) the sign of the cross written on a (legal) document to validate solemn declaration (25 occ. in formulaic use)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A3) traced in the air (10 occ.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B) the sign of the cross used in the act of blessing (26 occ.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C) a material object, a model or figure of a cross as a religious emblem; a crucifix (21 occ.)56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>~ for liturgical or devotional use (processional cross etc.) set up within a building or in the open air (an outdoor cross or crucifix) (17 occ.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>~ as a vision or apparition of Christ’s cross (3 occ.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D) used in general reference to Christ’s suffering on the cross and salvation (6 occ.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collocate verb(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>wyrcean (ofer),</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a)uritan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mearcian (mid),</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>swepnian [mid],</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>agrafan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>trymmcan mid, festnian mid, strangian mid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>segnian mid, bletsian mid</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

56 Including one—perhaps erroneous, because late—occurrence where rodetacen refers to Christ’s cross itself, i.e., the instrument of crucifixion: “þa noðde se
This power of the sign of the cross manifests itself in particular when it is traced (by saints or priests) in the act of healing, when it serves as a weapon against fierce might, a concept made explicit in the frequent collocation weapniā mid rodetacen “arm with the sign of the cross”:

(t6) Syðdan se hæþengylida eac sealde þone attorbæræn drenc þam apostole: & he mid rodetace his muð & ealne his lichaman gewæpnode. & þane unlybban on godes naman halsode. & syðdan mid gebyldum mode. hine ealne gedranc.60

[Then the idolater gave the venomous drink also to the apostle, and he armed his mouth and all his body with the sign of the cross, and exorcised poison in God’s name and then he drank all of it with bold heart.]

From the earliest period, it has thus also been employed in exorcisms and conjurations as a weapon against all kinds of dark spirits.61

While the little sign of the cross employed in the performativ acts depicted so far is mainly traced by priests, it can also extend its functional realm beyond the liturgy and rites of the Church. The most prolific use of the “sign of the cross” in a non-religious context is its employment as a written figure entered in a document to validate solemn declaration. It serves as a signature and kind of “seal in Christ” when charters, wills, or documents are signed and thus ratified “with the sign of the cross.” Here it features as a material drawing on the parchment. The act of signature itself is accompanied by certain

performativ formulae62 employing the Latin terms signaculum (sanctae) crucis or signum (sanctae) crucis, or an Old English term for the “sign of the cross,” such as rodetacen.63 This practice is amply attested in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and particularly in the witness lists of charters and wills. As performativ verbs used in the formulas, we most often find the verb fæstnian “to confirm, ratify,” often in pair formulas such as writan and fæstnian or, even more frequent, with getrymman “to strengthen, confirm,” getrymman and fæstnian.64 See as illustrative examples for different formulas (i.e., “I, King X, confirm/ratify Y with the sign of the holy cross”):65

(17) Ic Offa þurh Cristes gyf Þyrceca kining þas mine geceu mid rodetacne gefæstnige (S 126)66

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59 “Ne beo ge afyrhte þurh his gesiðæ: ac mearciað rodetacen on cowerum foreheadum. & ælc yfel gewit fram eow” (Be not afraid at the sight of him, but mark the sign of the cross on your forehead, and every evil shall depart from you): Clemoes, i, 445, homily 31, lines 184–86 (“Passion of St. Bartholomew”).

60 Clemoes, i, 214, homily 4, line 222 (“Assumption of St. John the Apostle”).

61 In the contexts of exorcism and popular medicine, we often find the term crīstes mæl and also some instances of cruc; see below, pp. 261–270.

62 The formulas are generally of the form “1st person personal pronoun (ie/see + (name)) + performativ verb in present tense + mid rodetacen/crystesmæl.” The 1st person personal pronoun and the verb in the present tense are indicators that these formulas are performativ speech acts, i.e., utterances that explicitly denote the action to be carried out.

63 For an employment of this act in an age of widespread illiteracy, see ch. 58 of the RSB which commands: “Write he þa fæstnunge mid his agenre handa, gif he þonne writan ne canne, bidde operne, þe writan canne, þæt hine aspelige, and he sylf on þam gewrite rodetacen mearcige and hy swa fæstniende mid his agenum handum uppán þone altare alegce” (He shall write the confirmation in his own hand; if he is, however, not able to write, he shall ask some other person who can write that he should be a substitute for him; and he himself shall mark the sign of the cross on the document and confirm it, with his own hands placed upon the altar): Arnold Schröer, ed., Die angelsächsische Prosarbeiten der Benediktinerregel, Bibliothek der angelsächsischen Prosa (Kassel, 1885–1888; repr. with appendix by Helmut Gneuss [Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1964]), p. 101, lines 3–7.

64 See DOE, s.v. fæstnian B.2.

65 Note the different morphological forms of rodetacen in these three examples: (17) uncertain: no modifier, (18) syntactic group: feminine bare in the prepositional phrase mid bare halgan rodetacne, and (19) compound: masculine premodifier ðam.

66 786 or 589 for 779 or 789 x 790. Offa, king of Mercia, to the monks of St.
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... & on ðam priddan dege sigfesest aras & salede his rodetacen his apostulum** (But he overcame death ... and on the third day he rose victorious, and gave the sign of his cross to his apostles).

This use probably yields a more surprising, distinct meaning of the compound rodetacen in Old English. Rodetacen, which explicitly employs the constituent tacen "sign" as its determinatum, can also denote a model or figure of a cross, i.e., a material object (see meaning C). It thus serves as a synonym for its determiner rod, and not—as would be regular—its determinatum tacen. This use of rodetacen instead of the simple noun rod thus shows that the form rodetacen is indeed lexicalized and, in accordance with Ælfric’s exposition in quotation (i), highlights that the cross is always a symbol. Christ’s cross is never just a gibbet: (21) “Towurpað þis deofolgild and toewysað. and æærað cristes rodetacen on ðære stowe” (Cast down this idol, and crush it, and raise up the sign of Christ’s rood on this place).

The same idea motivates the use of rodetacen (and, in the first place, signum crucis in the Latin exemplar) in the A-version of the Gospel of Nicodemus. Rodetacen here three times refers to a material object, which can be carried (cf. berende). This text, however, is somewhat idiosyncratic in that the feminine premodifiers anre (22a), bysse (22b), and bysse (22c) seem to indicate that rodetacen is not used as a neuter, but a feminine compound:

(22) Ac onomang ðam þe Enoh and Elias þus spræcon, heom þær to becom sum wer þe was earmlices hywes and was berende anre

While the identification of the letter TAU with the sign of the cross is common in allegorical patristic literature, Godden could not find any parallel for the detail that the Israelites marked their doors with the sign of the cross (see Godden I, p. 490). For Ælfric, it is obviously not absurd to use the inherently Christian rodetacen ("the salvation of Christ on the cross") in a description of the rites of the Jewish pascha.

70 Clemones, i, 443, homily 31, lines 119–121 ("Passion of St. Bartholomew").
71 Godden II, ii, 169, homily 18, lines 14–16 ("The Apostles Philip and James").

Mary’s, Worcester (MS from s. xii). 67 864 (Dorchester, Dorset, 26 Dec.) Æthelberht, king of Wessex, to the church of Sherborne; grant of privileges, with note that Æthelberht placed the charter on the high altar at Sherborne (865, Good Friday). English (MS from s. xii). 68 1023. King Cnut to Christ Church, Canterbury; grant of the port of Sandwich (diverse MSS from s. xii and later).

69 This context might also explain Ælfric’s anachronistic use of the term rodetacen in an Old Testament context: “God settæ on þære ealdan. æ. and het niman anes geares lamb æt ælcum hiwiscæ. and sniðan on easter-tide. and ærencæ mid ðæs lambes blode rodetacen on heora gedyrum” (God appointed in the old law and commanded a lamb of one year to be taken of every family, and slain on Easter-tide, and to make with the blood of the lamb the sign of the cross on their door-posts), Godden II, ii, 21, homily 3, lines 81–82 (“On the Epiphany of Our Lord”); “Hi mearcodon mid ðæs lambes blode on heora gedyrum. and oferslegum. TAU. þæt is rodetacen” (They marked with the blood of the lamb, on their door-posts and lintels, the letter TAU, that is, the sign of the cross), Godden II, ii, 151, homily 15, lines 52–54 (“On Easter Day”); and “God beæ beæ moe on egypta lande. þæt he & eall israela folc sceolde offran æt ælcum hiwiscæ gode on lamb. anes geares & mearcian mid ðæs blode rodetacen on heora gedyrum and oferslegum” (God commanded Moses in Egypt that he and all the people of Israel should offer, for every household, a lamb of one year to God, and mark with the blood the sign of the cross on their door-posts and lintels), Clemones, i, 354, homily 22, lines 6–8 (“On the Day of Pentecost”).
rodetacen [22a] onuppan hys exhum . . . He hym andswarode and cwað: " . . . And he me þysse rodetacen [22b] sealde and cwað: ga on neornxawang myd þysum tacne and gif se engel, þæ ys hyrde to neornxawanges geate, þæ inganges forwyre, ætwy hym þysse rodetacen [22c] and sege to hym þæt se hælenda Crist, Godes sumu, þæ nu wæs anhangen þæ þyder asende."72

[But while Enoch and Elias were saying these things, there came to them a certain man who was of a wretched appearance, and carrying a (sign of the) cross on his shoulders . . . He answered them and said: " . . . and He [the Savior] gave me the (sign of the) cross and said: "Go into paradise with this sign, and if the angel who is the keeper at the gate of Paradise does not allow you to enter, show him this (sign of the) cross, and say to him that Christ the Savior, the Son of God who has been crucified, sent you there."

Instances of a lexicalized compound rodetacen designating a “material object” are also attested to in the Vercelli Homilies. In quotation (23), rodetacna73 are listed together with ðōre halige reliquias “other holy relics” which have to be venerated with appropriate humility on Rogation Days: (23) “ær he mæssan hæbbe gehyrð, & barefotum Cristesbec & his rodetacna & ðōre halige reliquias eadmodlice gegret hæbbe”74 (before he has heard the mass, and has greeted the gospels, his crosses and other holy relics in a humble way with bare feet). In the second occurrence from the Vercelli Homilies, Cristes rodetacen refers to a material object, a procession cross, which is carried over the land on the Rogation Days: (24) "& we sculon beran usse reliquias ymb ure land, þa medeman Cristes

73 Note the plural form rodetacna which only makes sense if rodetacen refers to a concrete object, and not the cross as a general symbol for the salvation.

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rodetacen þæ we Cristes mæl nemnað, on þam he sylfæ þrowode for mancynnes alynsesse”75 (and we shall carry our relics over our land, the precious Christ’s crosses which we call Cristes mæl on which he himself suffered for the salvation of mankind). Since both of the occurrences in the Vercelli Homilies designate a material object, Scragg even gives “crucifix” as the single meaning for rodetacen in this text.76

The morphological and semantic analysis of rodetacen has thus shown that the term rodetacen and also the fossilized Cristes rodetacen should indeed be considered lexicalized compounds with concrete, distinct meanings in Old English. While the syntactic group þære rode tacen is mainly employed in general reference to Christ (and his salvation) or in contexts of blessing, the neuter compound þære rodetacen distinctly refers to the oldest variant of the sign of the cross, the little cross traced on something concrete, most typically a part of the body or parchment, or to a crucifix.

Words for the Sign of the Cross: Old English Cristes mæl

In the passage from the Vercelli Homilies quoted above (24), we not only see that rodetacen is indeed a lexicalized compound with a specific meaning, but also that it is not the only Old English term used to denote the concept “sign of the cross.” In this passage, the phrase “þæ medeman Cristes rodetacen” (the precious Christ’s crosses) is glossed by “þæ we Cristes mæl nemnað” (which we call Cristes mæl).

As mentioned above, cristes mæl, which here denotes a crucifix, is structurally similar to rodetacen, because it also incorporates a linguistic element meaning “sign”—OE mæl—as its determinatum.77 Its status as a lexicalized compound, is—like that of rodetacen—disputed in the dictionaries of Old English.

75 Scragg, Vercelli Homilies, [homily] XII, p. 228, lines 16–18.
76 Scragg, Vercelli Homilies, p. 455, s.v. rodetacen.
77 OE mæl is synonymous with tacen and generally refers to a kind of “sign” or “mark,” see BT, s.v. mæl.
OLD ENGLISH CRISTES MÆL: STATUS

Cristes mæl is attested to forty-four times in Anglo-Saxon sources. In contrast to other Old English dictionaries, it is not given a separate headword in the DOE, but is discussed in the head entry Crist in the section “in particular genitive constructions,” together with Cristes gleafa, Cristes lagu, Cristes bedob, Cristes godspel, and also Cristes rod and Cristes rodetacen (i.b.ii).

In view of the discussion on Old English compounds above, this lemmatization does not seem to grasp fully the word formation of cristes mæl as a lexicalized genitive compound. Expressions like Cristes bedob, Cristes godspel and the like are fully transparent genitive constructions in which the genitive Cristes functions as a modifier of the head, i.e., naming the originator in bedob or lagu (“Christ’s law;” “genetivus subjectivus”) or the object in Cristes gleafa (“belief in Christ;” “genetivus objectivus”). Cristes mæl, by contrast, should be regarded as a lexicalized compound similar to cristes-bœc “gospels” or cristes-masse “Christmas Day.” It clearly exhibits an advanced stage of lexicalization, because, in contrast to rodetacen, it has adopted meanings that are not predictable from the meaning of the constituents, i.e., it has undergone a restriction of meaning.

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78 In the DOE, we find 31 occurrences of cristes mæl, 11 matches for cristes mæl 2 for criste mæl.
79 J.R. Clark Hall, A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, 4th ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), for instance, has a cross-reference from cristelmael to Crister-mæl “Christ’s mark;” “the cross;” the latter is thus given priority. BTS only has entries for cristel-mæl (with a variant crystel) “I. a cross” and “II. the sign of the cross” and cristelmael-bœam “a tree on which a cross is fixed.” Holhausien, on the other hand, sees cristelmael as a derived form of cristes mæl; see Friedrich Holthausen, Altniederdeutsches etymologisches Wörterbuch (Heidelberg: Winter, 1934): “cristel-mael mn. “Kreuz” < Cristes mæl,” p. 60.
80 See pp. 246-253.
81 See DOE, s.vv. cristes-bœc and cristes-masse.
82 Morphologically, determiners, adjectival modifiers as well as cataphoric and anaphoric references to cristes mæl agree in all instances with the neuter noun mæl.

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form does not generally refer to a sign for/of Christ, but to the most important emblem of Christianity, the cross. An understanding of the full symbolic meaning and interpretation of cristes mæl as the “cross” requires the ideas stressed by Ælfric in the first quotation above, i.e., that the holy rood is a sign for Christ. Without this interpretative support in a theological background, cristes mæl could, for instance, also denote baptism (cf. German Christusmal “baptism” in theological discourse) or be taken to refer to the stigmata of Christ (cf. German Wundmal).

This advanced stage of lexicalization is also documented in occurrences which show phonological attrition. In addition to two instances of criste mæl with loss of the genitival -s in the first element of the compound,83 we find nine occurrences of a form cristelmæl or crystelmæl. Clearly this term also refers to the “sign of the cross,” as the description of the sign for the pistolboc in the Old English monastic sign list shows:

(25) “Dære pistol boce tacen ys þær mon wege his hand and wyres Cristes mæl on his heafde foran mid his þuman forpon þæt mon ræt god spel þer on and eal swa on þære cristes bucc”85

83 Some of these cases of phonological attrition are not easy to find because of (undocumented) emendations by the respective editors. The most recent editor of the Lacunaga, for example, provides a new occurrence by giving the text of line 804 as “Weorc Cristes[s]mæl of cassuca fifo.” In his critical apparatus, he explains the square brackets by “MS. cristemæl with the first part of the -m-resembling the top part of a low s;” see Edward Pettit, Anglo-Saxon Remedies, Charms, and Prayers from British Library MS Harley 585: The Lacunaga, 2 vols. (Lewiston: Mellen, 2001), p. 96 (804).
84 See also the structurally similar attrition and assimilation to nasal [n] in the attested spelling cristenmaelbeam (s. xii) for cristemælbeam. See DOE, s.v. cristemæl-beam.
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In view of these occurrences, it is surprising that the DOE lists *criselmæl*, but not *Cristes mæl* as a separate headword, and that merely a cross-reference “cristes mæl s.v. *crist*” is given at the end of the entry *criselmæl*. I would, by contrast, like to support the view of Holthausen and Clark Hall that *criselmæl* is a (colloquial) variant of *cristes mæl*, showing phonological attrition and assimilation. Accordingly, the form *criselmæl* should not appear as a headword, but in the section “attested spellings” for the headword *cristes mæl*. With respect to word formation, *criselmæl* only at first glance shows similarities to Old English patterns of word formation ending in Old English -el or Present Day English -le in Germanic languages (such as are attested in Present Day English *beetle* or *girdle*) or Frisian compounds with -l; it is, however, not akin to these coinages because they are basically derived from verbs. *Cristelmæl* is thus not formed on a pattern of the kind *(Crist)+ (el)+ (mæl)*; the element (el) must rather be considered an assimilation of the final genitival s to the following nasal. This process of phonological attrition, which is quite common in lexicalized compounds, leads to a loss of transparency of the original compound: the determiner term *rodetacen* in the description of another sign related to the gospels, namely for a homiliary containing the exposition of the gospels for the Night Office: “Gyf þu hwylice ofre hoc habban wylle þe godspelles trahet on sy bonne lege þu þine swyðran hand under þin hleor, and werd rode tacen on þin hæfod foran” (If you want any other book in which there is a gospel text, then lay your right hand under your cheek and make the sign of the cross in front of your head), Banham, *Monasteriales Indicia*, p. 28, no. 31. 89 See n. 79.

87 Banham, *Monasteriales Indicia*, p. 48, no. 124, and p. 59 (commentary).
88 Interestingly, the Anglo-Saxon monastic sign list also employs the synonymous term *rodetacen* in the description of another sign related to the gospels, namely for a homiliary containing the exposition of the gospels for the Night Office: “Gyf þu hwylice ofre hoc habban wylle þe godspelles trahet on sy bonne lege þu þine swyðran hand under þin hleor, and werd rode tacen on þin hæfod foran” (If you want any other book in which there is a gospel text, then lay your right hand under your cheek and make the sign of the cross in front of your head), Banham, *Monasteriales Indicia*, p. 28, no. 31. 89 See n. 79.
cristel is no longer fully motivated, i.e., no longer necessarily connected to the proper noun Crist, so that language users may even have lost the feeling for the original meaning of the compound ("Christ's mark").

*Old English Cristes mæl: Semantics and Register*

It is especially interesting that the terms *cristes mæl* and *cristelmael* are—in contrast to *rodetacen*—never used in the context of blessing (cf. meaning B for *rodetacen*), one of the core fields of the “sign of the cross.” Neither are they employed in general reference to Christ’s suffering on the cross (cf. meaning D for *rodetacen*). *Cristes mæl* and its variants are only used for the (sign of the) cross that can be seen or touched, i.e., for a model or figure of a cross, a crucifix (cf. meaning C for *rodetacen*),91 or for the sign of the cross as a manual gesture traced on something concrete (cf. meaning A for *rodetacen*). It is thus employed in exactly the contexts where we find the compound—and not the syntactic group—*rodetacen*.

Another prototypical example of *cristes mæl* designating a procession cross—in addition to the passage in the Verceilli Homilies quoted above in (24)—is attested to in the famous passage of the Anglo-Saxons’ first encounter with the (sign of the) cross from Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*. Here *sylfrene Cristes mæl* (translating “[veniebant] crucem [pro vexillo] ferentes [argenteam]”) denotes the silver cross carried in the impressive procession of Augustine and his companions, (27) “Ac hi halæs mid deofulcraeft ac mid godecunde mægene gewelgade coman: bærôn Cristes rode tacen, sylfrene Cristes mæl mid him & anlicnesse Drihtnes Hælendes on


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brede aþegle & awritene” (But they came not endowed with devilcraft, but virtue from heaven: they bore the emblem of Christ’s cross, and had a silver crucifix with them and a likeness of the Savior drawn and colored on a panel). As in quotation (24), *cristes mæl* is here again placed as a kind of gloss next to the expression *Cristes rode tacen* and explicitly refers to the actual material object made of silver, a procession cross with the “likeness of our Lord,” i.e., a crucifix in the narrow sense of the word. The wording of both this passage and in particular the Verceilli Homilies’ “pe we Cristes mel nemma” indicates that *rodetacen* and *cristes mæl* belong to different registers. The loan translation *rodetacen* seems to be the official term for something which is—as the authors/translator insinuate—in colloquial language also called *cristes mæl*.

This prototypical use of *cristes mæl* designating objects or concepts that can be seen and touched by everyone in colloquial language, is also found in the five occurrences of *cristes mæl* in Old English charter bounds, where it obviously refers to outdoor crosses serving as roadside or boundary crosses: (28) “And syðdan . . . to þæm Criste mæl. And swa fram þam Cristes mæle of dun weard ondlang anre ealde dic” (And then . . . to the sign of the cross. And then from the sign of the cross onwards along an old trench). This setting of *cristes mæl* in colloquial or at least everyday language may also account for the assimilated form *cristelmael*. This kind of “sloppy pronunciation” is related to spoken language and we accordingly find the *cristelmael* form mainly in the kind of sources we might expect, in functional texts such as the Anglo-Saxon monastic sign list (quotation 25) and in particular in Old English charter bounds:

93 S 201: C.E. 851. Berhtuwulf, king of Mercia, to St. Mary’s, Worcester; grant of 3 hides (cassati) at Grimley, Worcester. Latin with English bounds. [lost original; MSS s. xi² and s. xvii (incomplete)]; see also the occurrences listed in the DOE, s.v. *cristelmael*. 
(29) Dis sint þa gemæru ... þær þet cristel mæl stod of þan up.
. . . op þære ealdan byrig. 94 (There are the bounds . . . where the
sign of the cross stands, from there up . . . to the old town)

(30) . . . þonne on þa ealdan dic on þæt cristelmæl. Of þam cris-
telmeale . . . 95 (. . . then on the old trench to the sign of the cross.
From the sign of the cross . . .)

This view is corroborated by the two occurrences of a term cristelmæl-
beam unfortunately only attested in late charter manuscripts (s. xii;
s. xiii) which probably refers to a “tree with a crucifix attached to
it.” 96

While about half of the occurrences of cristes mæl (twenty-one
instances) designate a material object, a kind of crucifix, the other
twenty-three attestations refer to the little sign of the cross traced
on something concrete, often a part of the human body: (31) “Wid
blodrine of nosu, writh on his forheafod on cristes mæl” 97 (Against
bleeding from the nose, write on his forehead a sign of the cross).
Analogous to rodetacen, cristes mæl is also used for the sign of the
cross written on parchment in the formulas of witness lists and thus
employed for the ratification of charters and similar documents:

(32) Þæt wæs first seo kyning Wulfere þæt feoestnode first mid
his worde & siddan mid his fingere gewrat on Cristes mel & þus
cwæð: Ic Wulfere kyning mid pas kyningas & mid eorles & mid

94 S 738: 966. King Edgar to Ælfgifu, his kinswoman; grant of 10 hides (cas-
tatae) at Newenham Murren, Oxon. Latin with English bounds. [MSS s. xi and
s. xvii].
95 S 684: 960. King Edgar to Eanulf, his faithful minister; grant of 9 hides (cas-
satsi) at Tywarnhayle in Ferranzabuloe and St Agnes, and 2 (manesae) at Bosowsa
in Ladcok, Cornwall. Latin with English bounds. [MSS. s. x med, s. vii].
96 See BTS and DOE, s.v. cristelmæl-bæam.
97 Chapter heading in Oxford, St. John’s College MS 17 + London, British
Library, MS Cotton Nero C. vii, folios 80–4: see Ker, p. 435.

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heorotegas & mid þægnas þas gewitnesse mines gifas, toforan þone
ærcybiscop Deusdedic ic hit festnia mid Cristes mel. And ic Oswi
Norþhimbre kyning þeos mynstres freond & þes abbotes Saxulf hit
loue mid Cristes mel. And ic Sighere kyning hit tyðe mid Cristes
mel. And ic Sibbi kyning hit write mid Cristes mel. And ic Sighere
kyning hit tyðe mid Cristes mel. And ic Sibbi kyning hit write mid
Cristes mel. 98

[That was first the king, Wulfere, who confirmed it first with his
word, and afterwards wrote with his finger on the cross of Christ,
and said thus: “I, Wulfere, king, in the presence of kings, and of
earls, and of captains, and of thanes, the witnesses of my gift,
before the Archbishop Deusdedic, I confirm it with the cross of
Christ.” “And I, Oswy, king of the Northumbrians, the friend of
this minster, and of this Abbot Saxulf, commend it with the cross
of Christ.” “And I, Sighere, king, ratify it with the cross of Christ.”
“And I, Sibbi, king, subscribe it with the cross of Christ.”]

In sum, it is evident that cristes mæl (and its variant form cristelmæl)
is only used for a restricted range of the meanings found for rodetacen,
but precisely for those which could be established as the core mean-
ings of the compound rodetacen, i.e., (A) “little sign of the cross” and
(C) “crucifix.” Cristes mæl is, however, only used in a certain group of
texts, those that are basically early and which mainly document “col-
loquial” language to a larger extent than others: “Charm 1” (2 occ.);
the Vercelli Homilies (1 occ.); the translation of Bede’s Ecclesiastical
History (7 occ.); confessional and penitential texts (Conf 1.1, Conf
5; 3 occ.); “Rubrics and Directions for the Use of Forms of Service”
(Lit 5; 2 occ.); Charters (4 occ.); versions D (1 occ.), E (9 occ.) and
F (1 occ.) of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle; the Leechbook I and II (6
occ.); “Charm 15” (1 occ.); “Charm 16” (1 occ.) “Charm 19” (3 occ.);
and the Old English monastic sign list (1 occ.).

98 Irvine, Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: MS E, for the year 656, pp. 28–29.
99 For the abbreviations and the editions of the texts, see DOE and DOEC.
By contrast, *cristes mel* is very rarely found in texts of the theological or religious register, and thus, for instance, never attested to in the writings of Ælfric.100 While *rodetacen* is, for instance, used in the Saints’ Lives denoting the healing power of the sign of the cross, *cristes mel* is employed in a similar function and meaning in texts related to medical practice, chiefly popular cures and liturgical healing formulas (commonly classified as “charms”). The charm “Against Elf-Sickness or Elf-Disease,” for instance, uses *cristes mel* to designate a cross-shaped object (the lichen is taken from a cross) and also the little sign of the cross traced on a body part:

(33) Nim bisceopwyrt, finul, elehte, ælþponan niþpowearde, gehalgodes Cristes melæ ragu and stor, do ælcere handfull... And writ him Cristes mel on ælcum lime... Awæsc sibpan, do to drence, and bisceopwyrt and Cristes melæ ragu, awyl þriwa on meolcum.101

[Take bishop’s wort, fennel, lupine, the lower part of enchanters’ nightshade, and lichen from a hallowed cross/crucifix, and incense, take a handful each... And inscribe the sign of the cross on each limb... Wash it afterwards, make it a drink, together with bishop’s wort and lichen from a crucifix, boil them three times in several kinds of milk.]

This distribution of occurrences as well as the wording of the attestations, above, suggests that *cristes mel* was a very common term in Old English, but was probably more often used in everyday language than in written texts.102

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*Old English (?) cruc*

Even more restricted in its meaning and textual distribution is Old English *cruc*—a loan based on Latin *crux, crucis*—which is specifically used to denote the “sign of the cross” in texts documenting popular and liturgical healing practices. *Cruc* can without doubt be established as a synonym of *cristes mel* by an attestation in the second book of Bald’s Leechbook, which singles out two of the “signs of the cross” called *cristes mel* and refers to them as *cruc*.

(34) and he [se petraoleum] is god gif hwam seo spræc ofyld, nime þonne & wyrcr cristes mel under his tungan & his an lytel swelge. Gif mon eac of his gewitte weorðe þonne nime he his dæl & wyrcr cristes mel on ælcere lime, butan cruc on þam heafde foran, se sceal on balzame beon & ðe þoper on þam heafde ufæn.103

[and it [petroleum] is good if the speech of someone fails, then he shall take it and make the sign of the cross under his tongue, and swallow a little of it. Also if a man loses his mind, then he shall take part of it and make the sign of the cross on every limb, except the sign of the cross on the forehead, that shall be in balsam, and [also] the other one on the top of his head.]

Loans coined on Latin *crux, crucis* were borrowed as the common term for “cross” in the other Germanic languages. In Old English, which commonly renders this term by *rod*, we only find seven instances of *cruc*. It has been rightly pointed out by Käsmann in his study on the Middle English religious vocabulary,104 however, that it is

100 Neither does Ælfric use *mel* as an expression for “sign; mark,” a concept which he generally expresses by *tacen* (106 occurrences in the Catholic Homilies) or, occasionally, *beacen*, as in *fore-beacen* “portent” or *sigebeacen* “emblem of victory,” s.v. in Godden I.


102 This view is also corroborated by attestations from the early Middle...
remarkable that *cruc* has survived into Present Day English in *crouch* and *crouchman*, in particular since Middle English soon adopted another word modeled on Latin *crux*, the French term *crois*. This indicates that the rarely attested form Old English *cruc* was much stronger than today’s evidence seems to suggest.\(^{107}\)

Two of the seven occurrences of *cruc*, which are analyzed in detail by Bremmer in this volume, are of an idiosyncratic and somewhat accidental character. Once *cruc* refers to the material object and is used as a synonym for *rod*, the other from the translation of Bede—also unique in its meaning—is more difficult to interpret but most probably refers to the shape of the cross, in which the bishop prostrates himself, i.e., the sign of the cross made on the ground.\(^{108}\)

The other five attestations are taken from texts relating chiefly

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105 Cf. *OED*, s.v. "crouch" and *MED*, s.v. *crouche*. The form *cros* appeared—probably at an earlier date—in the north and east of England from the Norse *kros* (adopted from Old Irish *cros* and ultimately Latin *crux*; see *OED*, s.v. "cross"; *MED*, s.v. *cros*). In Old English, this is only known in topological nomenclature, mainly northern place-names such as "Crosby," "Crosshwaite." The *OED* also mentions that Wace (ca. 1175) cites *Olicrose* (apparently referring to the Holy Rood of Waltham) as the battle-cry of Harold at Hastings.

106 See *MED*, s.v. *crois*. The *OED* does not list the form in a separate entry, but generally states "English has had several types of this word, derived by different channels from Latin *cruc-em*" (s.v. *cross*).

107 For a fuller discussion of *cruc*, see Bremmer, "Old English 'Cross' Words" in this volume, pp. 208–215, and *DOE*, s.v. *cruc*. *DOE* only considers four occurrences as native, and regards the three attestations of the accusative form *crecum* in "Charm 19" (Storms’s no. 17) as "Latin forms in Old English context."

108 "and stod þær an medmycel rod on þære eordan on þam norðasteþynnna ... & se preost messode be cruce. Þa gesæh he ofer þa rode ane hand swylece heo bleotese" (and there stood a moderately-sized cross on the ground in the north-east corner ... And the priest was saying mass near the cross. And then he saw above the cross a hand as though it were blessing): Arthur S. Napier, ed., "An Old English Vision of Leofric, Earl of Mercia", Transactions of the Philological Society 1907–1910 (London, 1909), 184–86.


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to popular medical practice, namely from the Charms and the Leechbook. Four of them are found in "Charm 17" preserved in the third part of the Leechbook ("Against Elf-Sickness or Elf-Disease").\(^{110}\) These clearly refer to either the little sign of the cross employed as a performative act and written/traced in a certain way (cf. the verb *writ*) or—like (34) from the second book of Bald’s Leechbook—to a little cross traced on body parts functioning as an exorcism:

(35) Writ III crucem mid oleum infirorum, et cweð... Nim þonne þæt gewrit, writ crucem ofer þam drince, and sing þis... Wæt þæt gewrit on þam drence and writ crucem mid him on ælcum lime and cweð: Signum crucis Christi conserva te in vitam eter-nam. Amen.\(^{111}\)

[Write three signs of the cross with oil of the extreme unction and say... Then take the writing, trace the sign of the cross over the drink and sing over it... Wet the writing in the drink and write a sign of the cross with it on each limb and say: The sign of Christ’s cross preserve thee in eternal life. Amen.]

These attestations of the loan *cruc* in specific performative contexts suggest that the reason why *cruc* (probably pronounced /kruʧ/)\(^{112}\) was borrowed, probably lies in the fact that it commonly carried a very special force due to its foreign or even “learned” character as a loan. It may have been used on purpose, because it gave the charm or recipe a special power similar to other Latin or foreign formulas used in this text type.\(^{113}\) This would also account for the fact that the
word has proved to be rather strong in spite of the small number of Old English attestations. It may have carried a special force, as it was accompanied by manual and other gestures in special circumstances—usually highly emotional situations, such as cases of emergency, not necessarily documented in our extant written sources.

Quotation (35) also demonstrates that we have to take into account that the inflected forms of Latin crux, crucis—pronounced in its Romance way with a /ʃ/—were much more frequently heard in Anglo-Saxon times than our Old English sources document. It is a word used very frequently, not only in all kinds of Latin religious and liturgical texts but also in prayers and charms. In (35), the gesture of tracing the sign of the cross is accompanied by reciting the Latin formula “Signum crucis Christi conserva te in vitam eternam. Amen” (The sign of Christ’s cross may safeguard you in the eternal life. Amen). A similar context showing how the Latin term may have entered the Old English language is seen in an Old English “Cross Charm:” (36) “And wyrc swype gelome Cristes rode tacen on ðinum heafde and cweð his gelome: Ecce crucem domini, and cweð his bonne: Hoc signaculo sancte crucis” 114 (And trace the sign of the cross over

sedes adlocles acre earcre arnem nonabiuð ær æræm niðren arcum cunæ arcum arctua figara uñen binchi cutern nicuparam raf aðæ egal uñen arta arta arta trauclula trauclula, querite et iuenietis, aduio te per patrem et filium et spiritum sanctum non amplius crescas sed arescas, super aspidem et basiliscum ambulabitis et concubilabitis leonem et dracenem, crux matheu, crux marcus, crux lucas, crux iohannes; “Sing this prayer upon the black blains nine times; Firstly, Paternoster; “Tigað tigað calicet acleu elue sedes adlocles acre earcre arnem nonabiuð ær æræm niðren arcum cunæ arcum arctua figara uñen binchi cutern nicuparam raf aðæ egal uñen arta arta arta trauclula trauclula [no meaning can be attached to most of these words; Fn. 1]. Seek and ye shall find. I adjure thee by Father, Son and Holy Ghost that thou grow no greater but that thou dry up. Upon the asp and basilisk shalt thou tread and upon the lion and the dragon shalt thou trample. Cross Matthew, cross Mark, cross Luke, cross John.” Anglo-Saxon Magic and Medicine, ed. John Gratton and Charles Singer, Publications of the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum n.s. 3 (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), ch. 25, pp. 106–7.


115 I would like to thank Helmut Gneuss, Lucia Kornexl, Rolf Bremmer, the anonymous readers and, in particular, Sarah Larratt Keefer for their most helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.