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The Elusive Canutus:  
An Investigation into a Medieval Plague Tract

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The ‘Canutus’ treatise was perhaps the most widely disseminated medieval plague tract in Europe. For such a well-known text, it has had scholars grappling for a surprisingly long time with the problems of its authorship and attribution, and also with the relationship among the witnesses to the English text.

Some time in the 1370s Johannes Jacobi (or Jean Jacme), royal and papal physician, professor of medicine and Chancellor of the University of Montpellier, wrote a treatise on the plague, Tractatus de pestilentia.¹ It contains sections on the causes and signs of the pestilence, on preventative measures, on diet, and on phlebotomy. The writer draws on his own early experiences as a physician: ‘quondam fuit pestilentia in monte Pessulano et ego non potui vitare communitatem, quia transivi de domo in domum ad curandum infirmos causa paupertatis meae’.² He warns against corruption from dead bodies and foul standing water, and against corruption in the air. His practical advice includes avoiding towns and crowds and baths, keeping rooms well aired, and washing one’s hands and face frequently with water and vinegar.³ The tract was extensively copied well past the middle of the fifteenth century and some forty manuscript witnesses testify to its importance. It then falls into oblivion. While the advent of printing brought fame to many of his contemporaries, Johannes Jacobi seems to have been largely forgotten. His tract appears to have been superseded by another plague text, the Regimen contra pestilentiam, which was widely printed. In many editions this is attributed in a colophon to a Danish bishop who, when he is named, is most often called Kamitus. That, being ‘judged improbable on the face of it’, was changed to Canutus in an early entry in a British Museum catalogue and this name has stuck (and spread).⁴ Only a handful of manuscript copies

³ For a detailed synopsis, see, for example, Dorothea Waley Singer, ‘Some Plague Tractates (Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries)’, Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine, 9 (1916), 179–82.
of the *Regimen* or ‘Canutus’ exist, but there is a large number of early printed editions. ISTC lists twenty-two Latin incunables and three English ones. More editions appeared after 1500.

Not only did the ‘Canutus’ tract have wide currency, but its teaching was influential, and that influence continued to grow, particularly in England. Charles Creighton, in his 1891 history of epidemics in Britain, printed extensive extracts from the English translation because, as he put it, it was ‘the source of most that was taught on these matters in England for the next two or three hundred years’. However, as the antiquary David Murray was one of the first to suspect, Johannes Jacobi’s *Tractatus de pestilentia* and the ‘Canutus’ are one and the same text. In 1912 Karl Sudhoff demonstrated this very clearly: the ‘Canutus’ text is a prime example of late medieval repackaging. The *Regimen* is an abridged and rearranged version of the Jacobi plague tract; it copies long sections of the *Tractatus* verbatim and others nearly so, and even includes the passage ‘In monte autem Pessulanocommunitatemvitarenonpotui, quia transivi de domo ad domum curando infirmos causapaupertatis meae’. The author of the ‘Canutus’ was Johannes Jacobi. Sudhoff tentatively suggested that the text had been put together by a printer and that the Danish bishop never existed.

Dorothea Waley Singer dated the ‘Canutus’ to c. 1460, but if Sudhoff was right, we would expect to find no manuscript versions of the Latin text which predate the first printing. That was made in Paris by Ulrich Gering, probably in 1480. I am aware of only three manuscripts in which it is found: Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, MS Clm 6018; London, British Library, MS Additional 30935, and Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, MS 261. The first of these is from the Jesuit foundation of Erbesberg, which until 1595 was a Benedictine monastery. The ‘Canutus’ text is on fols 133r–140r and the date 1508 appears several times in that part of the manuscript, although not in the text itself. There is no mention of the author’s name in the text, but the colophon says: ‘Tractatus de regimine pestilentie domini Raimunti episcopi Arusini civitatis regni Dacie artis medicine expertissimi professoris finem habet.’

The British Library manuscript is also from a German source. It is a miscellany from the Carthusians in Erfurt, still in its Erfurt binding. The ‘Canutus’ text is on fols 326r–329r. There is no mention of the author’s name in the text, nor is there a colophon. Some of the texts in the manuscript are dated, the latest of those to 1479. The hand of the ‘Canutus’ text is from the end of the fifteenth century.

Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, MS 261 was made for Margaret Beaufort, countess of Richmond and Derby and mother of Henry VII. Her name is not mentioned in the manuscript, but it contains her badge and arms. It probably dates from after Henry’s accession to the throne in 1485 since an initial on fol. 30v contains a red rose surmounted by a crown. Its *terminus*
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ante quem is 1509, the year in which both he and his mother died. Some of its texts are in Latin and some in English, but all in some way have reference to the plague. Margaret’s first husband, the Earl of Richmond, died of the plague towards the end of 1456, while she was pregnant with Henry. She saw new outbreaks of pestilence around her in the 1480s, including the ‘Sudor anglicus’ or ‘Sweating sickness’ in the year of Henry’s accession.

The Fitzwilliam manuscript opens with the Latin ‘Canutus’ tract (fols 1r–9r), which is immediately followed by a version of the same text in English (fols 9v–19r). The former has a rubric which makes no mention of the author, nor does the text itself, but the colophon says: ‘Tractatus de Regimine pestilentico domini Kamiti Episcopi Arusienisis ciuitatis regni dacie artis medicine expertissimi professoris finem habet’.

The fact that all these manuscripts postdate the first printed edition of the Latin text supports Sudhoff’s view. He suggested in his 1912 article that an abridged version of the Jacobiti tract could have fallen into the hands of a printer, and that chance rather than fraudulent intentions may have led to its being published in someone else’s name. This is perhaps overly kind to the printer, who at a time when there were repeated attacks of the plague must have been on the lookout for new material to supply an ever-increasing demand among his customers. However, although the printer may have been more calculating than Sudhoff imagined, the scenario otherwise seems a likely one. I would, however, suggest that when the Danish bishop was introduced and given a name in this first edition, it was a wholly fictitious one, and that it was only much later, when attempts were made, as in the British Museum catalogue, to turn that fiction into something that made sense in a Danish context, that the name Kanutus appeared.

The 1480 Gering edition from Paris contains no reference to the author in the text proper, but calls him Kamitus in a colophon where the wording is identical to that of the Latin text in the Fitzwilliam manuscript. As noted, he is Raimuntus in the colophon of the Munich manuscript. In all but one of the twenty-two incunables listed by ISTC, the author is referred to as Kamitus, Kamintus, or Kamitus. The exception is an edition from c. 1500 which treats minims in a somewhat cavalier fashion, and has ‘donini [sic] Kanuti’ in a rubric and ‘dñi Kanunti’ in the colophon. None of the editions of the English text names the bishop, nor do any of the English manuscripts except London, British Library, MS Sloane 404. Unlike the others this has a colophon, where he is called Ramitti.

The Royal Library in Copenhagen has owned a copy of Gering’s 1480 Latin edition since the end of the eighteenth century, and also has six of the other early printings, including that by Zierikzee which introduces the form Kanutus. Not surprisingly, Danish scholars have been

14 The English text has not been translated from the Latin one which precedes it.
15 Francis Wormald and Phyllis M. Giles in A Descriptive Catalogue of the Additional Illuminated Manuscripts in the Fitzwilliam Museum Acquired between 1895 and 1979 (Excluding the McClean Collection) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), I, 194, read ‘Kanuti’, but as will be clear from the figure, there is a hairline on the fourth minim of this word.
16 ‘Der ursprüngliche Pesttraktat […] ist in mäßiger gekürzter Form in die Hände eines Druckers gefallen und vielleicht mehr durch irgendeinen Zufall als in betrügerischer Absicht unter den Namen eines anderen hinausgegangen’ (Sudhoff, Part III, p. 58).
17 Of these, eleven are composite volumes which also contain the Regimen sanitatis per circulum anni; another volume contains extracts from the ‘Canutus’ as well as two other texts (Antwerp: Mathias van der Goes, c. 1491).
(Cologne: Cornelis de Zierikzee, c. 1500); Klebs 245,21.
18 The German incunable refers to ‘Herr Kamit’ and the Portuguese to ‘D. Raminto’. Klebs does not list any vernacular French ‘Canutus’ editions, but notes French versions of the Tractatus.
19 Katalog over Det kongelige biblioteks inkunabler, ed. by Victor Madsen, 2 vols (Copenhagen: Levin & Munksgaard, 188
Figure 1: Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, MS 261, fol. 9r.
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at the forefront of efforts to identify the bishop. The only form of his name which makes sense in a Danish context is Kanutus, for which the Danish is Knud. The Latin for Aarhus (modern Danish spelling Århus), is Arusium or Arusia. However, there never was a bishop Knud in Aarhus in the Middle Ages. The only remotely possible Danish candidate is Knud Mikkelsen (fl. 1421–78), who was born in Aarhus, matriculated at Rostock University in 1421, was Vice Chancellor of Erfurt University 1434–35, became Bishop of Viborg (near Aarhus) in 1451, went on numerous diplomatic missions to other countries, including to England in 1449 and 1465, and to Scotland in 1460, and whose commentary on Jutlandish law was published posthumously in 1504.

As early as 1870 Christopher Bruun showed that Knud Mikkelsen must be discounted. He had no connection with medicine or Montpellier, and was too well known both in Denmark and abroad for a contemporary text to assign him repeatedly to the wrong diocese. Bruun also ruled out the suggestion made in 1847 by the Danish medical historian Fredrik Vilhelm Mansa that a Swedish bishop Knut in Västerås (Arosia) must have been intended; there never was a bishop Knut in Västerås.

As Isak Collijn, director of the Swedish National Library, pointed out in 1927, it was Guthrie Vine of the John Rylands Library in Manchester who introduced what has turned out to be the greatest red herring in this debate. In 1910, in a facsimile edition of a John Rylands incunable of the English version of the Regimen, he put forward Bengt (Benedictus) Knutsson of Västerås as a contender for the authorship. Vine’s reasoning is somewhat circular, partly because he took the biographical information in the treatise at face value. However, Bengt Knutsson was never a bishop. According to Gunnar Ekström in Västerås stifts herdaminne, Bengt, like Knud Mikkelsen, matriculated at Rostock (in 1434), he was a canon in Uppsala in 1448, archdeacon in Strängnäs 1453, and was elected bishop in Västerås in 1461, but died in May of the following year before his consecration could take place. He is not known to have had medical training or experience. There are no traces in Swedish records of his having been the author of any text, theological or medical, and no tradition connecting him to the Regimen prior to Vine’s conjectures. As Ekström put it, ‘the pestilence tract attributed to Bishop Bengt, which was printed in various countries and in several languages during the last two decades of the fifteenth century, was certainly not written by him’. Given the flimsiness of Vine’s case,
it is remarkable how persistent the view of the unfortunate Bengt as a plagiarist has remained, particularly in the English-speaking part of the scholarly community.\(^{30}\)

I think we can assume that neither the bishop, diplomat, and lawyer Knud Mikkelsen, nor the archdeacon of Strängnäs whose father’s name was Knut, ever plagiarized Johannes Jacobi’s plague tract. For every year that passes, it seems increasingly likely that the author’s name in the colophon was given as the entirely fictitious Kamitus from the beginning. Albert Klebs, by all accounts a rational and reasonable man, expected a more rational and reasonable explanation. Writing in 1926, he put forward what he saw as a seductive (‘verführerisch’) idea: there may have been an edition which predated the Paris one, one which had been made by a printer with Scandinavian connections who added the name Kanitus to an anonymous version of the Jacobi text, and the name was then misread. Klebs put his trust in Isak Collijn to turn up this ghost: ‘vielleicht gelingt es Collijn, der meist findet was er sucht, auch dieses aufzudecken’.\(^{31}\)

Isak Collijn died in 1949. Since nothing has surfaced in the subsequent decades, it seems likely that the printer who appended a name to the anonymous treatise was not particularly concerned that it should be one which made sense in a Danish context. Arusia almost does, Kamitus does not, but the editions sold well all the same; credentials which combined the supposed author’s high standing in the Church as well as in the medical profession will have mattered more.

We have so far seen that the text of the *Regimen* or ‘Canutus’ is Jacobi’s, and that there is no evidence to connect either the Danish lawyer and diplomat-cum-bishop Knud Mikkelsen, or the Swedish bishop elect Bengt, son of Knut, with the treatise. Was Sudhoff also right to assume that the ‘Canutus’ did not circulate in manuscript prior to the first print?\(^{32}\) He probably was. As we have already seen, all three extant Latin manuscripts of the ‘Canutus’ postdate 1480.

Given the clarity of the picture as far as the Latin texts are concerned, the circumstances surrounding the English versions have been surprisingly muddled. In addition to claims of a pre-print date for some of the extant manuscripts (which would presumably require a hypothetical, now lost, pre-print Latin manuscript to have been translated either in England

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\(^{30}\) The First World War may have limited the impact of Sudhoff’s 1912 article abroad. In 1916 Dorothea Waley Singer gave Bengt Knutsson as the author of the *Regimen contra pestilentiam* without any margin of doubt (pp. 183–85). However, even after Sudhoff’s views became generally known, Bengt’s name has stuck. In 1950 Singer and Anderson noted that the *Regimen* text is by ‘Benedictus Canutus (Bengt Knutsson, Bishop of Vosteras)’ and added: ‘This work of Benedictus is plagiarised wholesale from [Johannes Jacobi]’ (Dorothea Waley Singer and Annie Anderson, *Catalogue of Latin and Vernacular Plague Tracts in Great Britain and Eire in Manuscripts Written before the Sixteenth Century*, Collection de Travaux de l’Académie Internationale d’Histoire des Sciences, 5 (Paris: Académie Internationale d’Histoire des Sciences, 1950), p. 54). In 1994 Rosemary Horrox printed extracts from the English translation of the *Regimen*, introducing it as ‘the treatise of Bengt Knutsson, a mid-fifteenth century bishop of Västerås, near Stockholm. Knutsson took over wholesale one of the most popular plague tracts of the fourteenth c., that of John Jacobus’; see *The Black Death* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 173. The British Library ISTC entries for the *Regimen* all say: ‘often attributed in incunable editions to Benedictus Kamisius, Kamintus, Canutus or Kanuti (that is, Bengt Knutsson, bishop of Västerås). No incunable edition mentions the name Bengt or Benedictus, however (or Canutus, for that matter). I have picked these examples at random. There are many more (and they can perhaps be said to illustrate the potential influence of librarians in Special Collections).


\(^{32}\) In theory one or more lost, earlier editions may have existed, but I will here assume that Gering’s Paris edition of the Latin text from c. 1480, which is the earliest extant one with an attribution to the Bishop, was the first.
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or on the Continent), there has also been uncertainty about the actual number of manuscripts and versions.33

There are fourteen extant witnesses to the Middle English ‘Canutus’ text, and these belong to two versions.34 Version A is represented by one manuscript only, London, British Library, MS Sloane 404 (fols 282v–293v), and has muddied the water to some extent. It is not found in any early printing but it is the only version which exists in a modern edition. This is by Joseph Pickett and was published in 1994.35 Pickett dates the hand of the Sloane text to 1450–1500.36 Some of his criteria are subjective. He suggests that because in his view the translation is a literal one, and because he thinks that this is characteristic of early translations of any given text, it is ‘the earliest translation of this treatise into English’. It is difficult to follow him in this. He also suggests that the text ‘recalls the first translation of the Wycliffite Bible and the earliest translation of Guy de Chauliac’s Cynurgie’.37 Those texts are from the end of the fourteenth century, but he appears not to want to push the date of the Middle English ‘Canutus’ that far back. He assumes that the early editions of the medieval English ‘Canutus’ had manuscript antecedents connected with a historical Canutus, most likely in his view Knud Mikkelsen, the lawyer and diplomat.38

In addition to the ‘Canutus’, Sloane 404 contains the plague tract attributed to Benedict of Nursia and the ‘Circa instans’ of Platearius. All are in the same competent hand, and that hand is from the end of the fifteenth century. There are two main paperstocks in the volume.39 Their two watermarks both show a gloved hand with a six-petalled flower extending from the longest finger, but the detail of the cuff and palm of the glove as well as the length of the stem of the flower are different. On all leaves with these watermarks, the middle part of the glove disappears into the gutter, but it is nevertheless clear that neither has an exact match in Briquet, Piccard or Heawood.40 One is, however, similar to Briquet 11159 (Genoa 1483), the other resembles Briquet 11164 (Genoa 1493/95), but also Heawood 2482 (Rome 1509). There is, in other words, nothing to suggest that the ‘Canutus’ text in MS Sloane 404 predates the first edition of the Regimen.

39 There may also be at least two bifolia from another source; the watermarks on fols 26r and 35r show a glove with a frilled or wavy cuff similar to that in Briquet 11136 (see n. 40) (Perpignan 1497).
The remaining thirteen witnesses all belong to version B. There are seven printings; the first in the list below is the edition which was published in a facsimile by Guthrie Vine in 1910. George R. Keiser has suggested that the publication of as many as three Machlinia editions in the same year may have been part of a campaign by King Henry VII to refute the popular view that the ‘Sweating sickness’ was a judgement on him, and to provide ‘an authorized, if still unofficial response to the epidemic’. One early theory was that the disease was brought from France by Henry’s soldiers.

Edition 1: *A litil boke the whiche traytied many gode thinges for the pestilence.*
London: Machlinia, c. 1485 (STC 4589; Duff 72; Klebs 246.2)
Edition 2: *A litil boke necessare & behouefull aȝenst the pestilence.*
London: Machlinia, c. 1485 (STC 4590; Duff 73; Klebs 246.3)
Edition 3: *A passing gode lityll boke necessare & behouefull aȝenst the pestilence.*
London: Machlinia, c. 1485 (STC 4591; Duff 74; Klebs 246.1)
Edition 4: *A treatyse agaynst pestylence & of ye infirmites.*
London: Wynyn de Wordre, 1509? (STC 4592; olim 24235)
London: Wynyn de Wordre, 1511? (STC 4529.5)
Edition 6: *A litil boke for the pestilence.*
Antwerp: J. van Doesborch, c. 1520 (STC 4593)
Edition 7: *A litle treatice to preserue the people from the pestilence.*
London: Thomas Gybson, 1536 (STC 4593.5).

The six remaining manuscript witnesses to the English ‘Canutus’ all belong to version B:

1. London, British Library, MS Sloane 1588 (fols 275v–280v). The bulk of the volume is made up of seventeenth-century medical recipes and case notes by Sir Edmund King, written in spaces left blank in a collection of earlier medical recipes in several hands. The hand of the ‘Canutus’ tract is not King’s, but a late sixteenth-century one, and the text is an adapted and somewhat modernized version B text.

2. London, British Library, MS Sloane 2270 (fols 75r–77v). Pickett was not aware of this manuscript; Taavistainen notes it in *IMEP* 10, but not as containing the ‘Canutus’. An owner’s note on fol. 2r contains the name John Eames and the date 1530. A number of recipes and medical texts, including the ‘Canutus’, are in Eames’s hand.

3. London, British Library, MS Sloane 2276 (fols 191r–199r). The ‘Canutus’ text has been added on empty pages in this paper volume, which contains medical tracts which have been copied in over an extended period. Some texts have been added later than the ‘Canutus’, but there is still a large number of empty pages in the manuscript. There is a clear watermark

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41 Keiser, *Two Medieval Plague Treatises*, p. 319.
43 I give the years of publication as listed by STC.
44 According to Early English Books Online (http://eebo.chadwyck.com), this was the first English book with a title page.
45 A complete list can also be found in Linda Ehhras Voigts and Patricia Deery Kurtz, *Scientific and Medical Writings in Old and Middle English: An Electronic Reference* (eVK) which can be accessed through http://cctr1.unm.edu/cgi-bin/search, or in Kari Anne Rand, *The Index of Middle English Prose, Handlist XVIII: Manuscripts in the Collection of Pembroke College, Cambridge, and the Fitzwilliam Museum* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2006), p. 52.
46 Taavitsainen, *The Index of Middle English Prose, Handlist X*, p. 17.
The Elusive Canutus throughout, the distinctive Briquet 4846 (Genoa 1465/1466). The hand of the ‘Canutus’ does not occur elsewhere in the volume and this text is the only one in the manuscript which appears to have been marked up for printing, in red and black ink. None of the extant editions is sufficiently similar to have originated from it, however. Judging from the hand, the ‘Canutus’ in Sloane 2276 is likely to be the earliest of the English texts.

4. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson A. 393 (fols 96r–99r). The greater part of the manuscript, including the ‘Canutus’ text, was written by the clergyman John Reed c. 1528. The wording of the text is relatively close to the early editions. There are several references throughout the volume to the Pykeryng family of Oswaldkirk in Yorkshire.

5. Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, MS 261 (fols 9v–19r). As noted above, this manuscript contains both the Latin and the English ‘Canutus’. The latter is not a direct translation from the former, which has strong similarities with that printed by Sudhoff in 1912 from the manuscript which is now Wrocław, University Library, MS IV F 10. The English is a version B text, very close to the wording of the printing by Machlinia which was the basis for Guthrie Vine’s facsimile edition. It may well have been copied from that edition, but interestingly leaves out the two references to ‘the realme/royalme of Denmark’ on the first page. The manuscript probably dates from c. 1500; it cannot have been made after 1509.

6. Copenhagen, Det Kongelige Bibliotek (Royal Library), MS NKS 316c (fols 1r–7v). In IMEP 10 the manuscript is listed as containing five separate tracts, but it is obliquely identified with the ‘Canutus’. It is noted that the text omits the section on the tokens of pestilence, and it is therefore seen as distinct from that in the John Rylands facsimile, as well as being different from Sloane 404. Pickett’s early dating of Sloane 404 is incidentally accepted. In conclusion, IMEP 10 describes the Copenhagen manuscript as follows: ‘A doctor’s handbook in a late fifteenth-century hand. A note in the cover (from the time of rebinding 1850) gives the date 1484 for the book.’

The reader is left with the impression that the manuscript contains a different version of the text from the first five in the list above, and one which is also older than the others and possibly predates the first English edition (1485). Keiser dates the Copenhagen manuscript to 1475–1500. Linda Ehram Voigts and Patricia Deery Kurtz give no date in eVK2; Pickett was unaware of it.

It would be natural to assume that the manuscript was acquired by the Royal Library because of the attribution to the Danish bishop, but that is not the case. At his death in 1785, the Danish Count Otto Thott owned what was arguably the largest private collection of books in Europe. The majority were subsequently sold at auction, but Thott had bequeathed over 1,500 items, which he considered to be the most precious, to the Royal Library. Among these was the present NKS 316c, although that was not obvious at the time. The entire manuscript consists of what was originally a single quire of eight, the last leaf now missing, plus a paper endleaf. The verso of fol. 6 is blank, as are both sides of the endleaf. The crucial piece of

47 There is either a change of hand between the recto and verso of fol. 191r, or the same hand is writing the next section less formally. A similar change takes place on fols 192v–193r and on fol. 195r.


49 Duff 72; STC 4589; Klebs 246.2.

50 Neither Pickett, Taavitsainen or Keiser in his volume of A Manual, was aware of this text.

51 The database eVK2 (http://cctr1.umkc.edu/cgi-bin/search) is an expanded and revised version of Linda Ehram Voigts and Patricia Deery Kurtz, Scientific and Medical Writings in Old and Middle English: An Electronic Reference (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).
Figure 2: London, British Library, MS Sloane 2276, fol. 191r.
Here begynyth a lytell boke the whiche trauyth and correctyth manny gode thynge, necessaries for the misyneste, and sette seldeynesse called pestilence the whiche ofter tymes enseteth. Thys boke is made by the most expert goveynour in phisye, the bishop of Angyfete.

The tenterete worship of the blessed trinitee of the glorious dryvyng sauynt Anne and the conseruation of the seme soyle of alle estynge people as wel for them that ben holde, as for remedee of them that ben secke. The bishop of Angyfete doctour of phisye was wrytten by the most expert and famous doctours auenturid in phise. Some thynge of the misyneste of pestilence, of the dryvyng sauynt Anne suffreth vs to depart out of this lyfe. The first, if ye wylte the tolente of this misyneste. The second the aucter whereof it cometh. The thride tolente for the same. The fourth comfort for the seret and the pynapal melode...
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information about its provenance is not found in any of the Royal Library catalogues, but is supplied in that note ‘in the cover’ of NKS 316c to which IMEP 10 refers. The note is in the (mid-nineteenth century) hand of one of the Royal Library librarians and reads:

NB. Dette MS stod bag i Herbarius. Maguntiae, 1484. 4°, (41,–8) hvoraf det blev udtaget d. 28. Jan: 1850.
[Nota Bene. This MS was in the back of Herbarius. Maguntiae [that is, Mainz], 1484. 4°, (41,–8) whence it was removed the 28th Jan. 1850].

I think that the explanation is as follows: When the Harley manuscripts went to the British Museum after the death of Edward Harley, second Earl of Oxford and Robert’s son, the printed books in the collection were sold to the bookseller Thomas Osborne. Otto Thott acquired a large number of those, including about one hundred and fifty Harley incunables. Among these was the first edition of Peter Schöffer’s herbal, the Herbarius, printed in Mainz in 1484. This is now Royal Library no. 1922, and was Thott’s no. VII 1521. Madsen’s catalogue of the Royal Library incunables describes it as heavily annotated in English in a sixteenth-century hand, but like the Royal Library manuscript catalogues he omits the information contained in the note in NKS 316c.52 The ‘Canutus’ text came to Copenhagen as a stow-away in an incunable — bound into the back of the Schöffer Herbarius. Had it been recognized as a separate manuscript item, it would have joined the rest of the Harley manuscript collection and been in the British Library now.

The note also makes it clear that the year 1484 refers to the publication of the Herbarius, and cannot be taken to indicate a date for the manuscript prior to the first Machlinia edition, so one needs to look elsewhere for dating criteria.

There is a watermark on the singleton (fol. 1), and on one bifolium (fols 3/6). That too shows the top of the five fingers of a hand or glove with a six-petalled flower extending from the longest finger, but it differs from that in Sloane 404. The middle part of the glove is hidden in the gutter, but a looped line is nevertheless visible on the palm. This distinguishes it from Briquet 11163 (Nantes 1490), which is otherwise similar. The looped line is found in none of the Briquet glove watermarks, and although it is present in Piccard’s nos 155776 (Middelburg 1517) and 155779 (Windsor 1522), both of those have flowers with only five petals, so no match is possible. However, Heawood’s no. 2475 (Rome 1519–25) fits very well. The flower has six petals, its stem is relatively short and all fingers point upwards. Their relative position and shape, as well as the shape of the cuff, is the same as in NKS, and there is also a looped line on the palm of the glove. It seems safe to conclude that the paperstock in NKS postdates the 1485 Machlinia edition by several decades.

As far as the hand is concerned, the manuscript appears to be a copying exercise made under supervision. The scribe writes legibly, but in an untrained hand and with a very bad pen, which towards the end is almost like a stick. His supervisor starts him off by writing a heading and two lines (but not from the opening of the text) and then apparently leaves the

52 The Madsen catalogue entry for the Harley volume reads:
(1922)
Herbarius. Mainz: Peter Schöffer 1484. 4o.
HC. 84444. Pr. 121. Pell. 1311. VB 1540. Schreiber 4203. Type 2, 6, 7.
Kalveksindsbind. 18. Aarhundredre. I sidste uformede Del mangler
Bl. 2 (tomt), Bl. 13–20 erstattet med Blade fra et fransk Tryk
af Jean Bonhomme i Paris (Proctor 8050). Med talrige engelske
Prov.: Robert Harley. — Thott VII 1521.
The elusive Canutus

pupil to it, although he does come back later, and checks (but does not make him sharpen his pen).

To the pupil, or main scribe, the writing process is clearly what matters, and he seems not to be very concerned with what he is actually writing. The fact that he (or rather his teacher) does not begin at the beginning of the text, is at the root of the confused impressions among scholars of what the manuscript actually contains. The pupil is started off by his supervisor at the beginning of the section on the causes of pestilence. He then carries on writing to what is presumably the end of his exemplar, and when he gets there, which he does on fol. 7v, line 15, his supervisor writes the opening of the text, that is, three lines beginning ‘Here begynmeth a lyttyl boke þe wyche tretyth and rehercythe […]’. The pupil repeats the last six words, and carries on from there. Although the text then stops mid-sentence at the foot of fol. 7v because of the now lost last leaf of the quire, which will have contained the remainder of the section on tokens of the plague, it would have fitted neatly onto the two sides of the last leaf, and taken the scribe full circle through the text to the point at which he had started.

So, as far as the issue of versions is concerned, this text is definitely not a third version of the Middle English ‘Canutus’. It is the same one as in the seven printings and the other five manuscripts. Because one leaf is missing, the section on the tokens of pestilence is lost, but otherwise all of it is there, albeit copied in an idiosyncratic order. The text is in fact very close to one of the Machlinia prints from 1485 (STC 4591; Duff 74; Klebs 246.1). Like the English text in MS 261, it has print-type punctuation and few contractions, and was probably copied from a printed exemplar.

In conclusion, I hope to have shown that no manuscript of the ‘Canutus’ tract can be seen to predate the earliest (Paris) printing from 1480. The Danish bishop named ‘Kamitus’ in the colophon of the first editions of the Latin text was probably the invention of a printer, and neither Bishop Knud Mikkelsen of Viborg in Denmark nor Archdeacon Bengt Knutsson of Strängnäs in Sweden ever plagiarized Johannes Jacobi’s pestilence tract. Further, on present showing there are only two versions of the Middle English ‘Canutus’ text: version A which only exists in a single manuscript, and version B which encompasses all the remaining thirteen witnesses.53

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