



Eva Crane Trust

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TITLE: Honey crop forecasting in the Middle Ages

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For those interested in history

Honey crop forecasting in the Middle Ages

The illustration on pages 80 and 81 shows part of an illuminated "Kalendar" drawn around 1370, which throws interesting light on the importance attached to honey production at that time. The calendar is in the Bodleian collection (Rawl. 939), and was shown in the exhibition arranged by the Bodleian Library on the occasion of the Bee Research Association Meeting in Oxford in May 1971 (see *Bee World* 52(2) : 80-81).

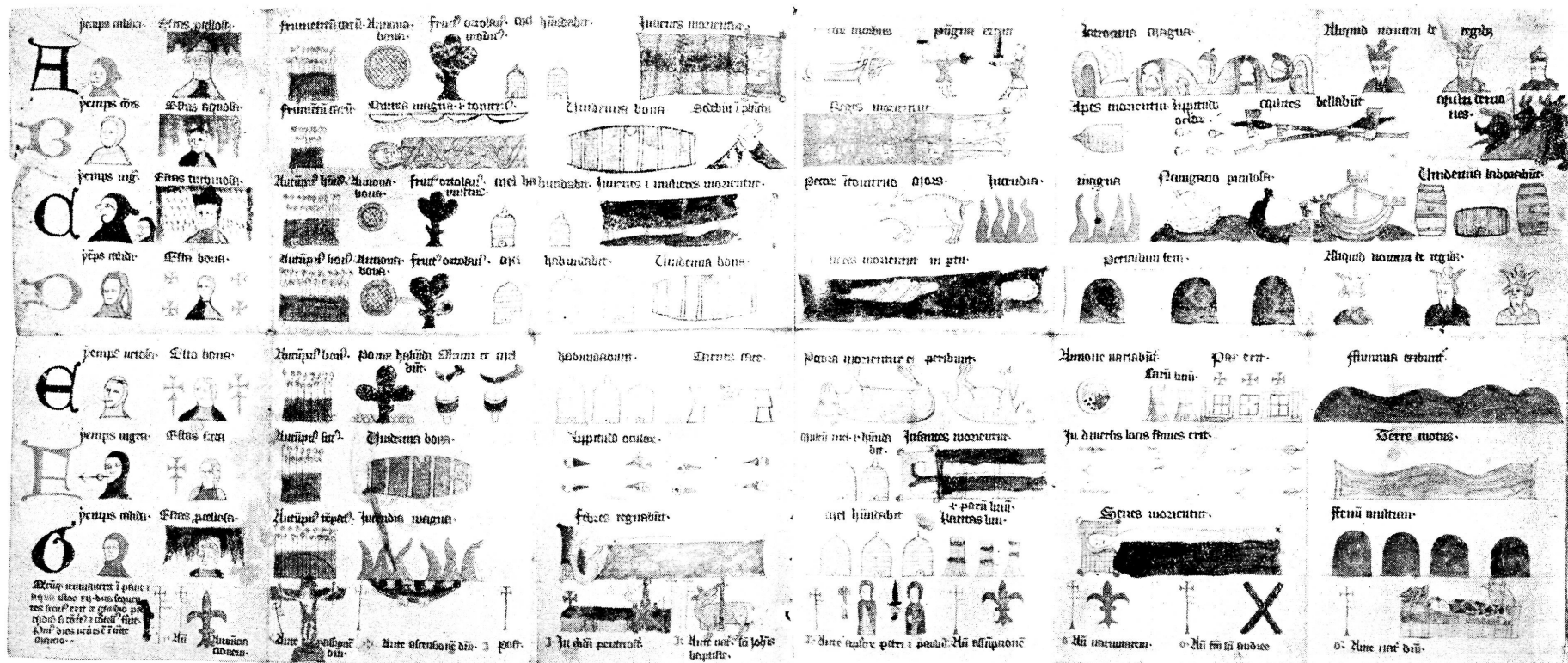
The making of calendars with computistic tables and prognostications is very old indeed, and from ancient times such calendars have been taken seriously. Their complicated history has not yet been exhaustively studied, and no attempt is made to enter into it here. By the fifteenth century these calendars were a common feature in England, Holland, Belgium and France. The one discussed here is earlier; it is a very fine specimen, made in England, and would be of the type Chaucer referred to as "kalendres enlumyned". It consists altogether of six large sheets folded to a pocket size (14 × 10 cm), with texts and coloured drawings on both sides. For convenience when referring to the English translations of the prognostications, given above and below the illustration, upper pages are numbered 1*u* to 6*u* and lower pages 1*l* to 6*l*.

Pages 1*u* and 1*l* give the Dominical or Sunday Letter for the year; if this Letter is A, 1st January of the year in question is a Sunday; if it is B, 2nd January is a Sunday; if it is G, 7th January is a Sunday. On pages 2*u* and 2*l* the crop predictions begin; they continue on pages 3-6, but interspersed with more and more prognostications of a general character—on the style of a present-day Old Moore's Almanac. In the various years, fights are predicted in year A (*pugna erunt*, page 4*u*); great injuries and thunderstorms in year B (*damna magna idest tonitruus*, 2*u*); some news about kings in year D (*aliquid novum de regibus*, 6*u*). Page 6, which offers various predictions of events—even of earthquakes (*terre motus*)—ends up with a series of four haycocks for year G, to signify much hay (*ffenum multum*). The final row of drawings on pages 1*l*-6*l* is a pious injunction: "Whosoever shall have fasted on bread and water these 12 following days will be certain of the joy of paradise if he has repented and confessed"; the fast days begin on the first Friday in March (page 1*l*) and finish with the Nativity (*ante nativitatem domini*) on page 6*l*; these entries are not translated.

Honey, represented by tall wicker skeps, is the only crop for which a forecast is made every year, and this gives some indication of its importance. In years A and C two skeps indicate plentiful or abundant honey yields (*mel habundabit*); in years D, E, F and G there are three skeps with the same prediction. For the remaining year (B) page 5*u* shows an overturned skep to signify that bees will die (*apes morientur*); this year was to have a friendly—mild—winter and a wet summer, so the mortality might be due to poor forage or to disease, or both.

The fruit crop is represented by a tree which, interestingly enough, is close by the hives. A prediction is given for four years out of the seven; it varies

A	warm winter	stormy summer	corn dear	crops good garden fruit fairly good	honey plentiful	youths will die	disease of livestock	there will be fights	great robberies	some news about kings	
B	friendly winter	wet summer	corn dear	great injuries & thunderstorms	grape harvest good	there will be wailing	kings will die	bees will die	sore eyes	soldiers will fight	many demons
C	black winter	turbulent summer	wet autumn	crops good much garden fruit	honey plentiful	youths and women will die	livestock killed by lightning	great fires	danger on the sea	they will work at the grape harvest	
D	warm winter	good summer	good autumn	crops good garden fruit	honey plentiful	good grape harvest	women will die in childbed	hay in danger	some news about kings		
	1 <i>u</i>	2 <i>u</i>	3 <i>u</i>	4 <i>u</i>	5 <i>u</i>	6 <i>u</i>					



1 /

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E	windy winter	good summer	good autumn	fruit will be plentiful	oil and honey plentiful	meat is scarce	livestock will die and perish	crops will vary	there will be peace	rivers will flood
F	black winter	dry summer	dry autumn	grape harvest good	soreness of eyes		much honey, i.e. abundant	children will die	there will be starvation in various places	earthquakes
G	warm winter	stormy summer	mild autumn	great fires	fevers will prevail		honey plentiful	high price of flax [i.e. flax scarce]	old men will die	much hay

from unremarkable (year D) to plentiful (C, E). It may seem surprising that the grape harvest is also predicted for four years. It is usually referred to as good, and is represented by a tun (barrel) or—in year C (page 6*u*)—by three tuns, immediately after the three ships in distress: danger on the sea (*navigatio periculosa*). Another unexpected crop is oil, which will be plentiful in year E; page 3*l* shows two hanging lamps. However, a manuscript drawn up in one country might well serve as a model for a later manuscript elsewhere, and the copyist would not necessarily revise it to suit local conditions. So the inclusion of predictions for grapes and oil may not imply that these commodities were produced in England at the time.

The predictions for livestock, on page 4, reflect unrelieved gloom: the animals will either be diseased (year A), or die and perish (year E), or be killed by lightning (year C). Meat is referred to only once, in year E, when it will be scarce—page 3*l* shows a cleaver descending on an empty chopping block. Humans suffer with their livestock. Apart from the fires in years C and G (5*u*, 2*l*), the floods and earthquakes in E and F (6*l*) and the robberies in A (5*u*), there will be starvation in various places (year F, 5*l*), wailing (B, 3*u*), sore eyes (B, 5*u* and F, 3*l*), and fevers (G, 3*l*). Deaths of specific groups are predicted in every year but one: youths (A, 3*u*), kings (B, 4*u*), youths and women (C, 3*u*), women in childbed (D, 4*u*), children (F, 4*l*) and old men (G, 5*l*). Year E is the only exception, when “there will be peace” (*pax erit*, 5*l*).

The picture one gets is of a hard life for man and beast in the fourteenth century, but of good conditions for the bees in six years out of seven. This could well be a fair assessment. It may seem curious that the wax yields are not mentioned with the honey, but—apart from oil, hay and flax—all the harvests predicted are food crops.

There is also a series of prognostications in an Anglo-Saxon manuscript dating from the eleventh century, which is in the British Museum (Bibl. Cott. MSS Tiberius A III). One of these runs: “If on Woden’s day the Kalends fall [i.e. year E] there will be a hard winter and bad spring; but a good summer. The fruits of the earth will be much beaten down, honey will be scarce, and young men will die. If the Kalends fall on the Sun’s day [year A] there will be a good winter, windy spring, and dry summer; and a very good year this will be, sheep will increase, there will be much honey, and plenty and peace will be upon the earth”.

The Red Book of Bath (1428), in the collection of the Marquess of Bath at Longleat, gives the prognostications for year A in the following verse:

“When the Christ’s day it cometh on Sunday
Thus followeth the year this book doth say
Windy winter and summer dry;
Birds shall multiply.
Much more honey and also wheat,
Vines with grapes and fruits sweet”.

Except for the fact that all these calendars assume a seven-year cycle of conditions (there being seven days in the week), they do not seem to show much consistency.

In presenting this excerpt from the 1370 calendar, which has remained unpublished for six centuries, my acknowledgements are due to a number of people. In 1952 Mrs. R. M. Duruz drew my attention to the calendar, no. 98 in the Exhibition of Latin Liturgical Manuscripts at the Bodleian Library.

Dr. S. J. P. van Dijk compiled the catalogue of this Exhibition, and provided more detailed information in letters; Mr. Henry Minn made further suggestions. Dr. G. Kolisko and others have made and checked the translations from the Latin, much of which is written in contracted forms. The Keeper of Western Manuscripts at the Bodleian Library, Dr. R. W. Hunt, kindly gave permission for the twelve pages of the calendar to be reproduced in *Bee World*, and both he and Dr. W. O. Hassell have given valued help in various ways.

The full colour of these charming drawings—which are a significant contribution to what is known of fourteenth century popular art—can be seen in a film strip (EC 234.3) which has been made at our request. It can be purchased from the Bodleian Library (Department of Western Manuscripts), Oxford OX1 3BG, for 85p including postage and packing (£1.00 overseas).

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