

Adverbial Clause of Purpose or Result, or Adjective Clause?

The Use of Ambivalent *þæt* in the Vercelli Homilies¹

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§ 1

In Old English, an adverbial clause of purpose or result is introduced most commonly by the simple connective *þæt*, along with other less frequent formulae such as *swa (...) þæt* and *to þan (...) þæt*.² Among seemingly relevant examples, however, some claim our attention, such as *Blickling Homilies 247.24 Min Drihten Hælend Crist, send þinne þone Halgan Gast, þæt awecce ealle þa þe on þisse wætere syndon ...*³ Here *þæt* may be either a conjunction introducing an adverbial clause of purpose with unexpressed subject, or a neuter relative pronoun with a masculine antecedent. Another similar example is *Exodus 10:25 wilt ðu us syllan offrunge, ðæt we bringon urum Gode*,³ in which *þæt* may introduce a final clause with unexpressed object, or a relative clause with a feminine antecedent. Thus, *þæt* is used in Old English in a way that allows two interpretations: as a conjunction introducing a clause of purpose or result with omission of a clause element, or as a neuter relative pronoun with lack of concord in gender and/or number. Examples are found ‘in prose and poetry of all periods’ (Mitchell §2139).

§ 2

There has been much discussion on the origin and the status of this construction.

Among those who see this as a relative construction, Shearin considers influence of Latin relative pronouns, referring to frequent examples found in Old English translations of Latin texts. For instance, he gives the above example from *Exodus*, a translation of Latin *Hostias quoque et holocausta dabis nobis, quae offeramus Domino Deo nostro*. He shows eleven examples including the two cited above: 7 from the Old Testament, 2 from Orosius, 1 from the Gospel, and 1 from the Blickling Homilies (Shearin p. 86). Others maintain that *þæt* had already developed its use as an indeclinable relative. Studies so far, however, have shown that examples of *þæt* without regard to gender and/or number are not so numerous as might appear (Kivimaa pp. 39ff. and Mitchell §§2134-35).

On the other hand, on the grounds that omission of the subject or object in *þæt* clauses is idiomatic in Old English, Mitchell regards the construction as the outcome of gradual identification of the conjunction *þæt* with the relative *þæt*, which was helped by the existence of the indeclinable relative *þe* (Mitchell §2143).⁴ Mitchell also observes that ‘[c]lauses of this sort are especially common with principal clauses which contain a rhetorical question demanding the answer ‘No’ [...], or a negative statement which in effect answers such a question’ (Mitchell §2140).⁵ Also interesting is his remark about the absence of this construction in Ælfric. He says that ‘as a grammarian, he [Ælfric] might have avoided a construction which was ambivalent’ (Mitchell §2143). Thus, various factors may affect the use and non-use of this construction.

The aim of the present study is to describe the use of ambivalent *þæt* in the Vercelli Homilies, as part of an attempt to provide a detailed analysis of this somewhat problematic construction, which was observed in Old English but which eventually fell out of use.

§ 3

The Vercelli Homilies is the name given to the twenty-three prose items of the Vercelli Book (Vercelli, Biblioteca Capitolare, CXVII). The manuscript has 135 folios and contains six alliterative poems as well. The homilies, which occupy more than two thirds of the volume, form the earliest surviving homiletic collection in

English. It is not a copy of a single book which might have existed at the time, but was put together from a variety of exemplars. Little is known about the exemplars. Some are translations from Latin; others are composites of different sources both in English and Latin (Scragg 1992, p. xxxviii). Authorship has not been established for any of the homilies, and the date of composition of each homily remains to be determined within a range from the later ninth to the later tenth centuries (Scragg 1992, p. xxxix).

The twenty-three items of the Vercelli Homilies were copied by a single scribe in the late tenth century. The language is generally late West Saxon, but the product shows some early or non-West-Saxon forms, and much evidence indicates that the scribe copied his exemplars slavishly.⁶ Therefore, the language of the Vercelli Homilies is more likely to be that of its exemplars than that of the Vercelli scribe. Scragg (1973) and Sisam (1976) each investigate the compilation and divide the items into several groups, based on the physical and linguistic evidence.⁷ Their findings will be referred to where appropriate.

§ 4

In the following sections, examples of ambivalent *þæt* in the Vercelli Homilies are examined.⁸ In collecting examples, the EETS edition by Scragg was used, with a facsimile version in EEMF occasionally being consulted. In the citations below, ‘þæt’ represents the abbreviated form ‘þ’, and a letter or letters enclosed in square brackets signify those emended by the editor. For the abbreviated form of *and* or *ond*, the ampersand is used in the present paper.

§ 5

We start with four examples, in which the *þæt* clause may be a relative clause with faulty concord (with a masculine antecedent in IX 35, IX 106 and IX 29,⁹ and a feminine antecedent in IX 99), or an adverbial clause expressing contemplated result with unexpressed subject. Examples are all from homily IX.¹⁰

IX 35 ... þonne is se þridda deað þæt þa sawla sculon eardigan on helle, þær nis nænig man þætte mæge his scippend herigan for ðam sare þe him onsitet.

IX 99 ... þonne nis nænig strengo þæt hine arære, for ðan he ne bið gelustfullod metes, ne he ne gymeð þysses eorðlican rices torhtnessa.

IX 106 Þonne is þære fiftan helle onlicnes tintrega genemned, for ðan þænne nis nænig man þæt mæge mid his wordum asecgan hu mycel þære fiftan helle sar is.

IX 29 Hwylc man is [on deaðe] þætte he sie dryhtes gemyndig, oððe hwylc is ðætte hyne on helle andette?¹¹

For comparison, an unambiguous example of an adverb clause is cited from the same homily: IX 119 *For þy nis nan man þæt he þ[an] on aweg hine astyrian mæge.*¹² The first *þæt* clause in IX 29 is another example.

A notable characteristic of the four examples above is that they are found in a negated statement, which can be paraphrased as ‘There is no ...’, with the existential verb *be* and indefinite expression: noun modified with *nænig* in the first three examples and interrogative *hwylc* in the last. This is in accordance with the feature Mitchell refers to as ‘especially common’ with ambivalent *þæt*, mentioned in section 2. As for IX 29, direct influence of the first clause on the second should be considered.

The three occurrences of the form *þætte* in the above examples (one in IX 35 and two in IX 29) may require a mention. Generally, *þætte* is not common as a final or consecutive conjunction and its use is limited to early prose (Michell §2831). It is not clear if the choice of this form here has any significance. There is no other occurrence of this form in homily IX, whereas we find 37 instances of simple *þæt* (four in the abbreviated form).

The following is another example of ambivalent *þæt*, which differs from those discussed above only in that the noun, *gemet*, is neuter.

IV 315 Swa manige stræla syndon swa nis æniges mannes gemet þæt hit asecgan mæge.¹³

Again, an example of adverb clause is given for comparison: IX 16 *Nis þonne næniges*

mannes gemet þæt he mæge asecgan þara goda & þara yðnessa þe God hafað gearwod [...].

§ 6

To be mentioned next is an example in which *þæt* can be taken as either a relative pronoun with a plural antecedent, or a conjunction introducing a clause expressing actual result.

XVIII 48 Wæs se winter þy gearo to þæs grim þæt efne manige men wæron þæt heora feorh for cyle gesealdan.¹⁴

In this example, the point is how we read the subordinate clause: *manige men wæron þæt heora feorh for cyle gesealdan*. The *þæt* clause may be a relative clause with plural antecedent *manige men*, or a consecutive clause with unexpressed subject, but the complex construction generated by the preceding consecutive formula *to þan ... þæt* may allow another reading. Therefore, I shall now turn to the prepositional formula, and then suggest another possible reading of XVIII 48.

§ 7

Some examples of the formula *to þan ... þæt* deserve consideration. Out of 18 examples,¹⁵ three are those with unexpressed subject. Two of these may be seen as a curious mixture of adverbial and relative constructions.¹⁶

IV 8 Nis nænig medsceat to þæs deorwyrþe on ansyne þæt þær þone dom onwendan mæge, butan he her hwæthwuga to gode gedo.¹⁷

XXII 71 Ne næniges mannes lif ne bið to þan lange þæt on sceortre & on sarigre hwile ne geendige.

In these examples, *þæt*, as part of the *to* formula, introduces a subjectless adverbial clause of contemplated result. It is, however, not impossible to take *þæt* as a relative

pronoun referring to *nænig medsceat* and *næniges mannes lif* respectively. This use is interesting when we consider that *to þan ... þæt* had probably originally been a final phrase with an explanatory noun clause, which later developed to be established as a final/consecutive formula.

When XVIII 48 is compared with these examples, one might feel that it is possible to read the second *þæt* clause in XVIII 48 as connected to *to þæs grim*, although of course *to þæs* forms a prepositional formula with the first *þæt*. Other adaptations of this homily, Blickling homily XVIII and MS Junius 86 (mid eleventh-century manuscript), read: *to þæs grim þæt efne manig man his feorh for cyle gesealde*.¹⁸

§ 8

The last example to be mentioned involves a preposition or an adverb.

X 189 þu, welega, to hwan getruwedest ðu in þine wlenceo & in þin oferflownessa þinra goda, & na on me þe hit þe eal forgeaf þæt ðu on wære?¹⁹

The following is another example if we take the first element of *onsettan* as separable.²⁰

V 24 ... for þan þær ne wæs oðeru stow on þam gisthuse þæt hio þæt cild meahte onsettan.

In these examples, *þæt* is reasonably described as a final conjunction with an adverb *on*, but in a construction like this, it is also possible to read *þæt* as a relative pronoun, especially where there is no idea of purpose, as in: Bede 184.2 *Ond þæt seolfe wæter; þæt heo þa baan mid þwogon, guton in ænne ende þære cirican*. Muraosa (1999) examines distribution of the sequence ‘*þæt ... preposition/adverb*’ in Old English prose and concludes that the sequence ‘*þæt ... adverb*’, in which *þæt* serves as a final conjunction, contributed to the development of the sequence ‘*þæt ... preposition*’, in which *þæt* serves as a relative pronoun with lack of concord in case, by analogy with the construction ‘*þe ... preposition*’.

§ 9

We have examined the use of ambivalent *þæt* in the Vercelli Homilies with occasional mentions of the related texts. The number of examples is small and the few examples are of limited variety; thus, this construction does not seem to have been productive in the texts considered, although nothing conclusive can be said at this stage. It is outside the scope of the present study to trace the origin of the ambivalent use of *þæt*, but some evidence indicates that idiomatic omission of a clause element such as subject and object may have helped to promote the use of the relative pronoun with lack of concord in the construction discussed.

Further study of other prose works will reveal more about the situation of and attitude toward this construction in Old English.

Notes

- 1 In this study, unless otherwise stated, *þæt* represents all possible forms of this particle: *þæt*, abbreviated *þ* (printed ‘þæt’ in many modern editions) and *þætte*.
- 2 Hereafter, *to þan (...) þæt* includes all the forms observed in the Vercelli Homilies: *to þam/dam/þæn/bas/pæs (...) þæt*, unless otherwise stated.
- 3 Cited from Shearin (p. 86).
- 4 For discussions so far on the origin and the status of this construction, see Mitchell §§2139-2143 and §§2806-2809.
- 5 Two of his examples from the Blickling Homilies follow: 59.33 *Hwylc man is þæt mæge ariman ealle þa sar & þa brocu [...]*, and 103.19 *& hwæpre nis nænig man þæt asecggan mæge þa miltsa [...]*.
- 6 See Scragg (1973 and 1992) and Sisam (1976).
- 7 See Sisam p.40 and Scragg p. 195. Their conclusions have some minor differences from each other. They also sketch out linguistic features commonly observed within the groups of items they define. The descriptions are mostly about inflections and spelling variations.
- 8 Appendix A lists all the examples discussed in the present study.
- 9 I take *hwylc* as masculine from the reflexive pronoun *hine*. This may also be interpreted as an adjectival element modifying an implicit subject *man*.
- 10 Homily IX came from a south-eastern homiliary of the second half of the tenth century (Scragg 1973, p. 205).
- 11 *On deaðe* is supplied from MS Bodley 340, an early eleventh-century adaptation of this homily.
- 12 *þ[an]on: þōn* in the manuscript.

- 13 MS CCCC41, an early to mid eleventh-century adaptation of this homily, reads: & swa manige stræla hæfð þæt deoful swa nis ænig mon to ðæs wis þæt he mæge hy eall atellan, and MS CCCC367, a twelfth-century adaptation, has: & swa manige stræla hæfð se deoful swa nan man hy ealle atellan magon.
- 14 Homily XVIII was drawn from a Mercian homiliary of unknown date (Scragg 1973, p. 205).
- 15 Apart from the 18 examples in which *to þan* and *þæt* are divided, there are eleven examples of the grouped formula *to þan þæt*.
- 16 The remaining one is: XVII 45 *Ne cwom ic to þam in worulde þæt ic Godes æ towurpe & tobræce, ac ic cwom to þan þæt [ic] hie gefylde & getrymede*. The subject *ic* is supplied by the editor.
- 17 The sentence that almost immediately follows shows a close parallel to this, but the subject is expressed: IV 10 *Nis ænig man þæt to þæs mycel age þæt he ne scyle his unwillan alætan his æhta & on unmyrhðe his lif geendian*.
- 18 *Efne* is omitted in the Blickling homily.
- 19 Homily X belonged to the same collection as that which contains homily IX. See note 10.
- 20 In the manuscript, we see a space between *on* and *a*, and between *a* and *settan*, but in many cases a space in manuscripts has no significance. MS Bodley 340, an early eleventh-century manuscript, has *settan* with *on* added suprascript; MS CCCC198, from the first half of the eleveneth century, reads *asettan*.
- 21 Examples of explanatory use of *þæt* are excluded, as in: XII 34 [...] *æلميhtigne God & his þone acendan sunu & þone halgan gast, þæt is sio halige brynnes* [...], and XII 29 ... *oðre halige reliquias, þæt syndon haligra manna lafe, hyra feaxes oððe hyra lices dæl oððe hrægles* [...]. Also excluded are examples of *þæt* referring to the preceding part of the sentence.

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Appendix A

Appendix A lists all the examples discussed in the present study.

- IV 8** Nis nænig medsceat to þas deorwyrþe on ansyne þæt þær þone dom onwendan mæge, butan he her hwæthwuga to gode gedo.
- IV 315** Swa manige stræla syndon swa nis næniges mannes gemet þæt hit asecgan mæge.
- V 24** ... for þan þær ne wæs oðeru stow on þam gisthuse þæt hio þæt cild meahthe onasettan.
- IX 29** Hwylc man is [on deaðe] þætte he sie dryhtes gemyndig, oððe hwylc is þætte hyne on helle andette?
- IX 35** ... þonne is se þridða deað þæt þa sawla sculon eardigan on helle, þær nis nænig man þætte mæge his scippend herigan for ðam sare þe him onsitet.
- IX 99** ... þonne nis nænig strengo þæt hine arære, for ðan he ne bið gelustfuldod metes, ne he ne gymeð þysses eorðlican rices torhtnessa.
- IX 106** Þonne is þære fiftan helle onlicnes tintrega genemned, for ðan þænne nis nænig man þæt mæge mid his wordum asecgan hu mycel þære fiftan helle sar is.
- X 189** Ðu, welega, to hwan getruwedest ðu in þine wlenceo & in þin oferflownessa þinra goda, & na on me þe hit þe eal forgeaf þæt ðu on wære?
- XVIII 48** Wæs se winter þy geare to þæs grim þæt efne manige men wæron þæt heora feorh for cyle gesealdan.
- XVII 71** Ne næniges mannes lif ne bið to þan lange þæt on sceortre & on sarigre hwile ne geendige.

Appendix B

Appendix B lists all the possible examples of element omission in adverbial *þæt* clauses in the Vercelli Homilies, following the manuscript reading. No attempt is made here to give explanations or other possible interpretations.

- II 20** ... þonne þinceð þam synfullan þæt noht ne sie þæs hates ne þæs cealdes, ne þæs hnesces, ne þæs leofes ne ðæs laðes, þæt hine þonne mæge fram dryhtnes lufan adon & his willan ascadan,
- V 134** Nænig ær him of helle astah, ne nænig ær him of deaðe aras, þætte efne sceolde deaðes byrgan.
- IX 206** & þencen we togeanes his tocyme, þæt is se egesfullica dæg, þæt us þonne ne ðurfe scamigan þonne he us nealæcð þæt he us gesion wille.
- X 113** We ðonne sculon his mildheortnesse geearnigan þæt eft mildne deman hæbben.
- XVII 45** Ne cwom ic to þam in worulde þæt ic Godes æ towurpe & tobræce, ac ic cwom to þan þæt

hie gefylde & getrymede.

XVII 134 & eac ure sawle frætwan mid godum dædum & mid halgum gebedum, & us eac georne & wislice healden þæt us eac nænig synna on us ne mæge findan, ne on wordum ne on dædum ne on geþohtum ne on nænigum þingum.

Appendix C

Appendix C lists all the possible examples of disagreement of the neuter relative *þæt* and its antecedent in the Vercelli Homilies, following the manuscript reading. No attempt is made here to give explanations or other possible interpretations.²¹

I 239 & sio sunne & ealle þa heofontungulu hira leoht betyndon & behyddon, þæt hie þa modor geseon ne woldon þæt men her on eorþan wið hira scyppend fremedon.

IV 10 Nis ænig man þæt to þæs mycel age þæt he ne scyle his unwillan alætan his æhta & on unmyrhðe his lif geendian.

IX 170 ... we ne weorðan aslidene innon þa fyrenfullan þystro þæt synfullum sawlum is gegearwod on helle togeanes.

XIV 126 þa wæs oðer man þæs mannes efenheafða, þætte him sceolde an hund peninga.