

# *Sign Theory: Some Scholastic Encounters with ‘The Fifteen Signs before the Day of Judgement’*

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*The traditional medieval ‘Fifteen Signs Before the Day of Judgement’ have recently become a subject of renewed scholarly interest. Nevertheless, more work has been done on vernacular versions than Latin ones and little attention has been paid to analytical or critical stances taken regarding the ‘Signs’. This article proposes to accomplish this, first by treating approaches taken by two Scholastic authors: Hugo of Novocastro and Guiral Ot. Then it looks at various Scholastic expressions of doubt.*

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**I**n May 2021 the New York Times reported: ‘New data shows how global warming is making life harder for Americans in myriad ways that threaten their health, safety and homes. Wildfires are bigger and starting earlier in the year. Heat waves are more frequent. Seas are warmer, and flooding is more common. The air is getting hotter. Even ragweed pollen season is beginning sooner.’ In the current environment it is no wonder that medieval listings of ‘Fifteen Signs before the Day of Judgement’ are attracting scholarly attention.<sup>1</sup>

This article has benefitted greatly from critical readings by Susanne Ehrich and an anonymous reader for this JOURNAL.

<sup>1</sup> The standard account that remains a point of reference is William W. Heist, *The Fifteen Signs before Doomsday*, East Lansing, MI 1952. Among important recent studies are those that concentrate on late medieval visual representations: Daniela Wagner, *Die Fünfzehn Zeichen vor dem Jüngsten Gericht: spätmittelalterliche Bildkonzepte für das Seelenheil*, Berlin 2016, and Daniela Wagner, ‘Zeit und Zeitlichkeit in bildlichen Darstellung der Fünfzehn Zeichen vor dem Jüngsten Gericht’, in Susanne Ehrich and Andrea Worm (eds), *Geschichte vom Ende her denken: Endzeitentwürfe und ihre Historisierung im Mittelalter*, Regensburg 2019, 361–76; and those that concentrate on vernacular versions: Brandon W. Hawk, ‘The *Fifteen Signs before Judgement* in Anglo-Saxon England’, *Journal of English and German Philology* cxvii (2018), 443–57, and

'The Fifteen Signs' appear from the late eleventh century to the end of the Middle Ages in innumerable versions. Shannon Gayk has recently called them 'an apocalyptic set piece'.<sup>2</sup> The signs were listed in Latin in scores of manuscripts and were translated into many European vernaculars. They also appeared within longer literary works, including drama and inevitably sermons, and were exhibited in the visual arts: in manuscript illuminations, sculpted reliefs, frescoes and stained glass. Recent scholarship has considered a good number of these instances, but no one has yet raised the issue concertedly of whether the signs were ever subjected to analysis or criticism. The following essay will pursue this topic, limiting itself to Latin texts written during the period of high Scholasticism. It intends to show that some readers did not just sit back and let the Fifteen Signs with their roiling seas roll over them.

A brief review of the main lines of the tradition is necessary. Originally three listings of 'Fifteen Signs' dominated the field in Latin: one by 'Pseudo-Bede' and two others by Peter Damian and Peter Comestor. All attributed the signs to 'Jerome' and maintained that he found them in 'annals of the Hebrews', but neither identification can be substantiated, and both are apparent fictions. Although some of the woes derive from Scripture, the 'Fifteen Signs' were a medieval invention. The Pseudo-Bede version originated in England, perhaps as early as the eighth century, but in terms of circulation history that is irrelevant, for the earliest widely-circulated version, deriving from two letters of Peter Damian, entered the field around 1062, followed around 1100 by Pseudo-Bede, and then after around 1170 by one from the *Historia Scholastica* of Peter Comestor.

The contents of the three lists bear considerable resemblances to each other. For that reason, only one, that of Pseudo-Bede, need be reproduced:<sup>3</sup>

1. The seas and rivers will rise forty cubits above the mountains.
2. They will sink to the bottom.
3. They will return to normal.
4. Fish and sea monsters will gather and roar, with their meaning intelligible only to God.
5. Waters will burn from sunrise to sunset.
6. Plants and trees will emit a bloody dew.
7. All buildings will be destroyed.

Shannon Gayk, 'Apocalyptic ecologies: eschatology, the ethics of care, and the Fifteen Signs of the Doom in early England', *Speculum* xcvi (2021), 1–37.

<sup>2</sup> Gayk, 'Apocalyptic ecologies', 16.

<sup>3</sup> For the Latin with English translation see Martha Bayless and Michael Lapidge (eds), *Collectanea Pseudo-Bedae*, Dublin 1998, 178–9. The texts of Damian and Comestor are reproduced in Wagner, *Die Fünfzehn Zeichen*, 273–4.

8. Stones will fight each other.
9. An earthquake will occur unlike any since Creation.
10. Hills and valleys will be levelled and the earth will be flat.
11. Humans will emerge from caves and run about as if mad.
12. The stars will fall from the sky.
13. The bones of the dead will gather and rise from tombs.
14. Those remaining will die so that they can rise again with the other dead.
15. The world will be destroyed by fire as far as the limits of hell.

The signs in Damian's list duplicate, sometimes in different order or with different wording, much of what appears above but have a few new terrors replacing some of the old: birds will gather fearfully in the fields; rivers of fire will appear in the sky; beasts will come into the fields and howl. As for Comestor's list, it followed a different order from the others but added nothing new. A fourth Latin list, basically a mixture of the Damian and the Comestor types, was added in the thirteenth century by James of Voragine in his enormously popular *Legenda aurea*.<sup>4</sup>

Variety was often increased by contamination among lists, but any indication of incredulity was absent, with the exception of a hedging preamble by Peter Damian which states:

That which we learn from the report of Saint Jerome about the fifteen signs in as many days that precede the Day of Judgement we judge proper to include here as not superfluous. Just as we do not grant these words the strength of authority, so we do not entirely deny faith in them. We therefore simply insert the matter as it has reached us.<sup>5</sup>

Damian's hedging was reiterated by others who took up his text, but they then repeated his list without qualms. All told the 'Fifteen Signs' were thoroughly well-ensconced in the medieval literature until the second half of the thirteenth century, and even afterwards they generally were repeated without cavil.<sup>6</sup> But my purpose here is to show that from about 1250

<sup>4</sup> Gayk offers a useful list of the 'major branches of the Fifteen Signs motif' in parallel columns: 'Apocalyptic ecologies', 36–7.

<sup>5</sup> 'Illud tamen quod de quindecim signis totidem dierum diem iudicii praecedentium beatum Hieronymum referre didicimus, hic eisdem verbis inserere non superfluum iudicamus. Quibus profecto verbis sicut nec auctoritatis robor adscribimus, ita nec fidem penitus denegamus. Res ergo sicut ad nos pervenit, hujus stilo se simpliciter inserat': Heist, *The Fifteen Signs*, 27.

<sup>6</sup> One outstanding exception of which I am aware are eight lines in the Middle High German 'Apokalypse' written by the Thuringian knight, Heinrich von Hesler, between 1250 and 1260. See *Die Apokalypse Heinrichs von Hesler*, ed. Karl Helm, Berlin 1907 (verses 19832–40). Heinrich refers to the signs as 'gelougene veichen' (a pack of lies). I am unable to account for his taking this position, unless it is an expression of antisemitism on the basis of his understanding that the source of the signs were 'Hebrew annals'.

until about 1320 one can find examples of analytical examination or critical spirit.

*Hugo de Novocastro OFM*

The two most detailed analyses of the signs of which I am aware were both written by Franciscans. Hugo de Novocastro (c. 1270–c. 1323), ‘Doctor Scholasticus’, was a Parisian Franciscan theologian who published a long treatise on last things in Paris in 1315, *De victoria Christi contra Antichristum*.<sup>7</sup> Hugo took an original stance regarding the Fifteen Signs whereby he transformed them for the cause of millennialism.

The *De victoria Christi* was a lengthy work on eschatology that aimed at encyclopedism. It consisted of two books: the first treated the Antichrist’s life from his birth until his awful reign, the second his defeat and subsequent events that would transpire before the Last Judgement. Clearly the Fifteen Signs belonged in the last part of this story.

Hugo began his consideration with a chapter on ‘The Fifteen Signs according to the tradition of the Jews’ (II.11).<sup>8</sup> This opens with the usual statement that St Jerome tells of having read them ‘in annals of the Jews’. Then follows a list that depends on Peter Damian’s, although stripped down to essentials. That might have sufficed, but not for Hugo, who then wrote: ‘Nevertheless, the Magister Historiarum [Peter Comestor], following the purpose of Saint Jerome, appears to perceive them and to order them otherwise.’ And upon saying this he offered Comestor’s list, followed by the explanation: ‘I set down these signs twice because I found them twice, and granted that they are not certain, they seem to have some probability and much concordance with signs and truth that Christ predicted, as will appear below. Moreover, they are said reasonably because they were never seen at another time, nor will similar ones come in the future.’<sup>9</sup>

Still Hugo was by no means finished with this subject and offered another, entirely original, chapter: ‘On the signs of judgement according

<sup>7</sup> See R. Lerner, ‘Antichrist goes to the university: the *De victoria Christi contra Antichristum* of Hugo de Novocastro (1315/1319)’, in Spencer Young (ed.), *Crossing boundaries at medieval universities*, Leiden 2011, 277–313.

<sup>8</sup> Hugo de Novocastro, *De victoria Christi contra Antichristum*, Nuremberg 1471. Because this edition is not paginated I refer parenthetically to book and chapter within my text.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Hec autem signa dupliciter posui quia dupliciter posita inveni et licet certa non sunt, probabilia tamen aliqua videntur et multum concordantia cum signis et [edition: a] veritate que Christus est predictis, ut inferius apparebit. Dicuntur autem rationabiliter propria quia nusquam alio tempore visa sunt, neque consimilia futura sunt’: *ibid.*

to evangelical truth' (II.12). In this he writes: 'As in Hebrew tradition fifteen signs will precede Judgement, so according to Evangelical Truth fifteen signs must precede the advent of the Judgements of Christ which are foretold dispersedly in the New Testament.'<sup>10</sup> Hugo's decision to list 'signs of Evangelical Truth' that succeeded 'Jewish tradition' was unprecedented and an act of self-assurance. At the opening of his treatise he had voiced a protestation taken from Amos (vii.14), 'I am not a prophet, nor the son of a prophet' ('Non sum propheta neque filius prophete'), but in announcing 'signs of Evangelical Truth' he was effectively taking on that mantle.

Even more striking was the fact that he began his own new list with two signs that were joyful. He devoted full chapters to each (II.13, 14). The first was 'the final recovery of the Holy Land' ('ultima recuperatio terre sancte'). To support this he adduced Luke xxi.24: 'Jerusalem shall be trodden down by the Gentiles till the time of the nations be fulfilled.' According to Hugo this fulfilment was to come after the death of the Antichrist, when 'all Israel will be saved' (Romans xi.26). In so maintaining he linked 'the final recovery of the Holy Land' with the universal conversion of the Jews, effectively a sign itself although he did not count it as such. The received Fifteen Signs 'according to the Jews' were each to last for a day, but evidently the happy condition marked by the 'first evangelical sign' needed to last longer even though Hugo did not specify how long that would be.<sup>11</sup>

Hugo's second 'evangelical sign' was 'the complete preaching of the Gospel of Christ' ('completa predicatio evangelii Christi'). He took this specification directly from Christ's eschatological sermon in Matthew: 'this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world, for a testimony to all nations: and then shall the consummation come' (Matt. xxiv.14).<sup>12</sup> In addition Hugo noted that actually four events would transpire: the fulfilment of evangelical preaching; the entrance of the fulness of the Gentiles (Romans xi.25); the conversion of all Israel to Christ; and, as he had already stated, 'the final recovery of the Holy Land', which he now specified would be accomplished by 'sons of Israel converted to Christ'. This was remarkable because the coming together of Jews and Christians before the End was basically an expectation espoused by Joachim of Fiore.<sup>13</sup> More than that, so far as I am aware the final

<sup>10</sup> 'Sicut in traditione Hebraica signa quindecim precedent iudicium, sic et secundum veritatem evangelicam xv signa adventum districti iudicii Christi debent precedere que sparsim in scripturis novi testamenti predicunt': *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> 'Implebuntur que post ipsam tempora nationum et perfecte israhel convertetur ad Christum quod quia non erit nisi in illo medio tempore inter mortem antichristi et iudicium': *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> 'Predicabitur hoc Evangelium regni in universo orbe, in testimonium omnibus gentibus, et tunc veniet consummatio': *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> See my *The feast of Saint Abraham: medieval millenarians and the Jews*, Philadelphia, PA 2001, 23–37.

restoration of Jerusalem by the Jews was a position previously taken only by St Bonaventure in his ultimate 'Joachite phase'.<sup>14</sup> Finally, to compensate for not mentioning how long the time of the first evangelical sign would be, Hugo now said that the four events encompassed by his second sign must endure for 'a moderate interval' ('debeant esse modicum intervallum').

Hugo's remaining 'evangelical signs' are of little concern here for all were dolorous except for the final one, 'the appearance of the last signs of the Son of Man in heaven'. (Apparently to vary matters, he borrowed from various lists.<sup>15</sup>) What must be emphasised here is that Hugo de Novocastro boldly offered a new list of fifteen signs that he understood to succeed the time-honoured Hebrew ones. (Whether he believed the earlier ones would be replaced by the evangelical ones he did not say, but it seems that he meant to imply that.) Moreover, he introduced themes of millennialism into the context of what otherwise was always a listing of frightful adversities.

### *Guiral Ot OFM*

Guiral Ot, 'Doctor Moralis', is best known for having assumed the generalship of the Franciscan Order in 1328 after the deposition of the schismatic Michael of Cesena. But he was also an important scholastic theologian of his day who worked in a wide range of fields: economics, logic, metaphysics, ethics, natural philosophy, theology and politics.<sup>16</sup> To this it must be added that on one occasion he lectured on apocalypticism.

Ot delivered his lecture on apocalypticism between 1320 and 1322. At the time he was theological lector in the convent of the Friars Minor of Toulouse, speaking in the Christmas recess to university students studying the decretals. Sylvain Piron has shown that this practice of commenting on decretals by theological experts to students of canon law was a custom at

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 51–2.

<sup>15</sup> For the sake of completeness here is what he offers: 'Tertium confusio sonitus maris et fluctuum. Quartum universalis terremotus. Quintum de aere terrores et tempestates. Sextum quod arescent homines pre timore et expectatione que supervenient universo orbi. Septimum quod virtutes celorum movabuntur. Octavum quod sol obtenebrescet. Novum quod luna non dabit lumen suum. Decimum quod stelle cadent de celo. Undecimum ignis omnia conflagrans. Duodecimum mors omnium viventium. Tredecimum tuba angelica clamans surgite mortui ad iudicium. Quartumdecimum resurrectio mortuorum. Quintumdecimum apparitio ultimi signi filii hominis in celo.' (The eighth sign – the sun darkening – also appears in a vernacular Anglo-Norman list; the reference to the moon is not found in any of the standard Latin lists.)

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, William Duba and Chris Schabel (eds), 'Gerald Odonis, Doctor Moralis and Franciscan Minister General', *Vivarium* xlvii (2009), 147–373.

the University of Toulouse.<sup>17</sup> Although short passages from the only surviving complete version of Ot's lecture were published by the redoubtable Charles-Victor Langlois in 1927,<sup>18</sup> the entirety has never appeared in print.

Why should a lecture on last things have been a fitting subject for canon law students? The best guess is that Ot's point of departure was the decretal, *Damnamus*, which condemned 'a little book' of the Abbot Joachim containing Trinitarian errors while condoning all his other works. Whatever the impetus, the lecture treated a lively subject and seems to have been regarded as an event since two *reportationes* survive.<sup>19</sup> (The second covers only about the first half of the lecture.) Ot was comprehensive. The full lecture treated events to transpire before the Day of Judgement, on the Day of Judgement and after the Day of Judgement. The *reportatio* that covers the entirety states in a preface that Ot found his material in 'various theological places, and mostly in Daniel and books of Joachim, although he did not assert whether they were true but reported them as he found them written'.<sup>20</sup> For our purposes the parallel preface in the incomplete *reportatio* appears to be more helpful. This states that Ot drew on 'a certain book called Daniel which he read in Paris that contained many partial books, among which was a book called Joachim in which was written certain preliminaries that would come before the Day of Judgement'.

The relevant point here is the reference to 'certain preliminaries'. The commitment of this scribe appears to have been limited to Ot's opening account of a succession of dire and wonderful events culminating in Antichrist's death. This material is known nowhere else and may have come from the 'book called Joachim' – *spuria* attached to Joachim's name. But the remaining material, appearing only in the first *reportatio*, continues with the Fifteen Signs and then with accounts of what would happen on and after the Day of Judgement. Since the contents of these sections are more or less traditional it seems reasonable to suppose that they did not appear in a 'book called Joachim'. Because the Fifteen

<sup>17</sup> Sylvain Piron, 'Les *studia* franciscains de Provence et d'Aquitaine (1275–1335)', in K. Emery Jr, W. J. Courtenay and S. M. Metzger (eds), *Philosophy and theology in the studia of the religious orders and at papal and royal courts*, Turnhout 2012, 303–58 at pp. 345–6.

<sup>18</sup> Charles-Victor Langlois, 'Guiral Ot (Geraldus Odonis), Frère Mineur', *Histoire littéraire de la France* xxxvii (1927), 203–25 at pp. 213–14.

<sup>19</sup> I know of three witnesses. The only complete version is of 'the first *reportatio*', located in Bibliothèque nationale de France, ms Latin 8023, fos 59r–60v (second half of the fourteenth century). The preface and first part of this appears in Joachim of Fiore, *Psalterium decem cordarum*, Venice 1527, fo. 279r. I discovered a second *reportatio* in Real Academia de la Lengua, Madrid, ms 18, fos 70v–71r.

<sup>20</sup> The prefaces of the Paris and Venice copies are almost identical in this regard except for the fact that P lacks V's first two sentences.



Signs alone are of issue here I will take the liberty of maintaining that the account was by Ot himself.<sup>21</sup>

The clearest argument in favour of this view is based on the lecturer's scholastic comment on the 'eighth sign'. Whereas all three received listings foretell the coming of a terrible earthquake as either the eighth or ninth sign, the lecturer finds it insufficient to report (as his eighth sign) that there will be a universal earthquake but specifies that it will differ from that treated by Aristotle in his second book of the *Meteorologica*, where earthquakes are caused by 'confinement of wind in the veins of the earth'. ('Terremotus universalis, non talis qualis determinatur ab Aristotile, secundo *Metheorum*, qui fit propter inclusionem ventus in venis terre.') The reference is accurate and someone such as Ot could have learned it as part of the standard curriculum in the liberal arts; Aristotle does write in the *Meteorologica* that 'not water nor earth is the cause of earthquakes but wind'.<sup>22</sup> Yet this surely is a pedantic point to make in the midst of listing frightful signs. All that can be said is that the lecturer was punctilious and ostentatiously displaying his scholastic education.

Taking this pedant to be Guiral Ot, his version largely follows Pseudo-Bede, with one small change in content and one change in order, as well as two 'signs' that diverge from Pseudo-Bede and follow Peter Damian. The small difference with Pseudo-Bede is that Ot has the seas on the first day rising to a height of fifteen cubits whereas Pseudo-Bede gives forty cubits. Since Ot's fifteen cubits appear in the list by Damian it appears to be a typical example of contamination rather than a detail of Ot's own devising.

More substantial changes on the other hand must have been made by Ot himself. For one, he favoured explicit subgroupings. Before him all the listings of the Fifteen Signs lacked coherence except for the opening four that dealt with 'seas': buildings fell, stones split apart, beasts howled. Previously only Peter Damian had sought to find some order. After presenting his fourth sign Damian stated that the first four were 'of the sea' and the following three were 'of the air and ether'. But then he made no further reference to common denominators because there were none. In contrast Ot's scholastic mind-set was averse to disorganisation: the Lord could not have worked helter-skelter. Consequently, Ot made order, regrouping his presentation of fifteen signs into three units of five: the first pertaining to 'water or humors', the second to 'earth' and the last (somewhat helplessly) to 'their nature'.

The beginning was easy enough since the relationship of the first four signs to the seas (water) was a given. But Pseudo-Bede's fifth sign already

<sup>21</sup> See Appendix 1 below for an edition of Ot's version of the Fifteen Signs.

<sup>22</sup> *The works of Aristotle translated into English: Meteorologica*, Oxford 1923, book II, 8 (366a).



presented a problem since ‘waters burning from sunrise to sunset’ could have gone either under the heading of water or fire. Apparently to avoid that, Ot jumped over to Pseudo-Bede’s sixth sign: ‘plants and trees will let out a bloody dew’, allowing him to place this under the rubric of ‘humors’ that he saw related to ‘water’. Then he moved to his second grouping of five, which he placed under the heading of ‘earth’. This allowed him to pursue Pseudo-Bede’s sequence, the latter’s seventh through ninth signs (the destruction of buildings, the battling of stones and a great earthquake) becoming Ot’s sixth through eighth. For his own ninth sign, stars falling from the sky, Ot moved to Pseudo-Bede’s twelfth, and for his tenth – mountains being levelled – he conveniently borrowed from Pseudo-Bede’s own tenth sign.

Moving to his last group of five signs – vaguely offered under the rubric ‘of its nature’ – Ot was able to start by appropriating a sign given by Pseudo-Bede. Ot’s eleventh sign – ‘bones of the dead rising from graves’ – was Pseudo-Bede’s thirteenth. Then, however, for his twelfth and thirteenth signs he felt the need to look elsewhere and switched to the list of Peter Damian. His twelfth sign, that humans will have such fright that they will be unable to speak, has no analogue in Pseudo-Bede but resembles Damian’s fourteenth sign, that humans would ‘run around almost like mad and not be able to respond to each other’. And a clear indication of searching comes with Ot’s thirteenth sign. For this Ot states that there will be fire in the sky and that sparks will go from east to west and *vice-versa*, a prediction evidently taken from Damian’s sixth sign which states that there will be ‘rivers of fire going from the setting sun and flowing towards the east’. Finally, with the most eschatological of his Fifteen Signs, the fourteenth and fifteenth, Ot was able to return to Pseudo-Bede: all men still alive will die so that all may be resurrected on the Day of Judgement; and the whole world will burn to the limits of hell.

Ot, then, imposed himself on the signs, changing positions and borrowing from more than one source. His reordering according to subject is the only such attempt known to me and might properly be called ‘scholasticising’. Moreover, he took the liberty of adding to the end of his list two more signs that had never been listed elsewhere: ‘the heaven of the evil angels will burn’; and ‘all filth of earth, air, fire, and water will fall over the heads of the damned’. In effect, then, he was offering ‘Seventeen Signs before the Day of Judgement’.

Aside from his regrouping Ot felt moved to offer elucidations regarding some of the laconic statements he had inherited. Although the model for his first sign offered: ‘On the first day the sea will rise 15 cubits above the mountains like a wall and the rivers similarly’, Ot had more to say and wrote: ‘From this you should not understand that the sea runs above the entire earth 15 cubits but that these 15 cubits will be higher towards the sky, not destroying the banks, [for] the sea will stand erect toward

the sky like a good wall.’ And he offered another elucidation with regard to the second sign. For him the sea would not only be sinking to the bottom but would be ‘sinking so that one will be able to cross the sea with dry feet’. With regard to his thirteenth sign, Ot’s closest model referred to ‘rivers of fire’ appearing in the sky, whereas he clarified this by telling of ‘fire in the sky like lightnings that are similar to fire’ (*sicut fulgura que sunt similia igni*). Otherwise, we have already noted his remark that ‘there will be a universal earthquake but not such as Aristotle determined in his second book of the *Meteorologica*’.

Aside from elucidations, Ot challenged one terrifying supernatural prediction as if he were a natural scientist. Pseudo-Bede had written for the twelfth day that ‘stars and signs will fall from the sky’ (‘signs’ here probably meant zodiacal signs), but Ot felt called to question this. Instead he wrote: ‘stars will fall from the sky, nevertheless, [only] apparently for they will be burning vapors’ (*tamen aparenter quia erunt vapores accensi*). In other words he was maintaining that the ‘falling of stars’ really referred to shooting stars or meteors, not actually an apocalyptic occurrence. In sum, although Guiral Ot moved boldly to make the Fifteen Signs more orderly and sensible, it is indicative of the weight of tradition that he concluded his presentation by reiterating the attribution to St Jerome.

### *James of Voragine OP*

So far Dominicans have not entered our story, but they lie at the heart of it. We may begin by considering the treatment of the Fifteen Signs in James of Voragine’s enormously popular collection of saints’ lives, the *Legenda aurea*, compiled around 1260. James, a Genoese who was active in preaching throughout many parts of Italy, placed a version of the Fifteen Signs prominently toward the opening of his collection in a prologue treating ‘the spiritual advent and return of the Lord’. Although his point was not to dismiss the truth of the appearance of fifteen signs before the Judgement, he recognised that Comestor and Damian reported different versions and decided to offer a new one that selected from both.

James displayed great self-confidence in overhauling a tradition supposedly passed down by St Jerome. Finding that he could not be sure as to which of his two sources should be preferred, he simply decided to conflate them toward the goal of being all-encompassing. Although sometimes it was necessary to diverge from the order of one or the other, he excluded nothing from either list and when necessary harmonised. Thus where Comestor had written that on the seventh day stones would collide and Damian that on the ninth day rocks great and small would split into four parts so that one part would collide into another, James wrote that on the seventh day stones would collide and break into four

parts, adding 'it is said'.<sup>23</sup> He obviously was aware that his two presumably authoritative accounts differed but by his harmonising he avoided acknowledging this reality. In one case, moreover, he found himself obliged to face up frankly to the situation. Comestor had written regarding the fifth day that plants and trees would give forth bloody dew and Damian that birds would gather in the fields, neither tasting nor drinking but fearing the coming of Judgement. Faced with this complete discrepancy James threw up his hands, first by repeating Comestor's statement, and then by offering Damian's different report with an acknowledgment that 'others assert'. Here was an implication that everything said of the signs was as assertion.

### *The editors of St Thomas Aquinas*

Whereas James of Voragine took it upon himself to overhaul a tradition, Dominican editors of St Thomas simply rejected it. Given the universal acceptance of the Fifteen Signs until the second half of the thirteenth century it is only mildly surprising that Thomas himself accepted them. He had occasion to refer to the signs in his earliest work, his commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, written during his years in Paris as Bachelor of Theology (1252–6). In the course of treating last things, Thomas asked whether certain signs would precede the Judgement. After listing three objections he responded in the affirmative: 'It is said: *there will be signs in sun and moon and stars* [Luke xxi.25].' Then he continued: 'Moreover: Jerome sets down fifteen signs preceding the Judgement saying ...'. Without qualification he then set down the Fifteen Signs as he found them in a version descending from Peter Damian but without any of Damian's hedging about authenticity.<sup>24</sup>

Shortly after 1274, however, Thomas's editors retracted. His Italian Dominican assistants in Naples, under the direction of Reginald of Piperno, who completed his unfinished *Summa theologica* after Thomas's death in 1274, calmly altered the master's original stance. Now, in the

<sup>23</sup> 'Septimo petre adinvicem collidentur': Comestor (as Wagner, *Die Fünfzehn Zeichen*, 274); 'Signum noni diei: Omnes lapides tam magni quam parvi scindentur in quatuor partes, unaqueque pars collidet alteram partem': Damian (as Wagner, *Die Fünfzehn Zeichen*, 273); 'Septima petre adinvicem collidentur et in quatuor partes scindentur et unaqueque pars, ut dicitur, collidet alteram': Voragine (as Jacopo da Varazze, *Legenda aurea*, ed. Giovanni P. Maggioni, Florence 1998, 16). Gayk overlooks this conflation: 'Apocalyptic ecologies', 36.

<sup>24</sup> 'Praeterea, Hieronymus ponit quindecim signa praecedentia iudicium dicens, quod primo die': Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Sentences: Book IV, Distinctions 43–50*, trans. Beth Mortensen and others, Green Bay, WI 2018, 328 (distinct. XLVIII, q. 1, art. 4, questiuncula 1). Wagner states that in the *Sentences* commentary Thomas repeated Damian's hedging, but I do not find this in either of the two editions I have consulted: *Die Fünfzehn Zeichen*, 237.

treatment of last things parallel to what appeared in the *Sentences* commentary, they followed the work as customary in their supplement and listed the Fifteen Signs as previously set down. But then they issued an outright disavowal: 'Jerome does not assert the signs that he sets down but states that he finds them written in annals of the Hebrews. These indeed have much too little probability.'<sup>25</sup>

### *De precedentibus ad iudicium*

An Italian Dominican who investigated last things further was the unknown author of an extended treatise on eschatology entitled *De precedentibus, concomitantibus et subsequentibus ad iudicium venturum* (*On the antecedents, concomitants, and results of the judgement*).<sup>26</sup> Although this treatise has until now eluded commentary, it is deeply learned, sometimes entertaining and, from the present point of view, a striking example of a critical stance regarding the Fifteen Signs. I have been unable to establish the authorship. An earlier attempt to attribute the work to St Thomas was excluded by the expert Pierre Mandonnet.<sup>27</sup> At least it can be said with reasonable confidence that it was written by a Dominican: it repeats words from the Dominican Hugh of St Cher's Revelation commentary, *Aser pinguis*,<sup>28</sup> and it praises mendicants who are 'preachers of the Gospel and defenders of the faith'.<sup>29</sup> Near certainty obtains as well for Italian authorship, for six

<sup>25</sup> "Utrum aliqua signa precedent adventurum Domini ad iudicium? . . . Signa verò que Hieronymus ponit, non asserit, sed in annalibus Hebraeorum se ea scripta reperisse dicit; que etiam valde parum verisimilitudinis habent": *Summa Theologica S. Thomae Aquinatis*, VIII: *Supplementum*, Paris 1860, 75, art. 1 (in this edition at p. 348).

<sup>26</sup> I have used two manuscripts, Biblioteca del Sacro Convento, Assisi, MS 635, fos 146v–157v (late thirteenth/early fourteenth century) and Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 808, fos 76v–99v (fifteenth century), as well as an imperfect printed version in St Thomas Aquinas, *Opera*, ed. S. E. Fretté, Paris 1871–82, xxviii. 629–53, repr. from Hyacinthe de Ferrari, *Sancti Thomae Aquinatis Tractatus de adventu et status et vita Antichristi*, Rome 1840, containing only the part of the work that is relevant here, including 'Circa statum purgationis'. I take the title *De precedentibus, concomitantibus et subsequentibus ad iudicium venturum* from the Assisi manuscript.

<sup>27</sup> Pierre Mandonnet, *Des Écrits authentiques de Saint Thomas d'Aquin*, 2nd edn, Fribourg 1916, 155–6.

<sup>28</sup> Compare MS Vat. lat. 808, fo. 87ra, 'Et sancta ecclesia quasi dimidie hore silentio, scilicet tempore quod sequitur usque ad finem mundi, pacificata conquiescet', which is identical to Hugh of St Cher OP, *Aser pinguis*, 'Et sancta ecclesia quasi dimidie hore silentio, scilicet tempore quod sequitur usque ad finem mundi, pacificata conquiescet', as cited in Robert E. Lerner, 'Poverty, preaching, and eschatology in the commentaries of "Hugh of St Cher"', in Katherine Walsh and Diana Wood (eds), *The Bible in the medieval world: essays in memory of Beryl Smalley*, Oxford 1985, 157–89 at p. 163 n. 18.

<sup>29</sup> 'Quarti assessores erunt chorus pauperum que omni dimiserunt proper Christum, et secuti sunt eum, sicut sunt predicatorum evangelii, et defensores fidei': MS Vat. lat. 808, fo. 92rb. Further support for Dominican origins may come from the fact that a copy of

of seven known manuscripts are of Italian provenance.<sup>30</sup> As for dating, the work must have been written after 1236 on the grounds of its citation of *Aser pinguis*. Probably it was written after 1270 because of a reference it contains to ‘the error of Aristotle and his followers arguing for the eternity of the world’<sup>31</sup> – an ‘error’ that became notorious as the result of its appearance on a list promulgated in 1270 by the bishop of Paris.<sup>32</sup> The fact that several manuscripts date from the fourteenth century offers a rough *terminus ante quem*.

The author of *De precedentibus* was widely read. He cited from all four Latin Fathers as well as St Basil, Cassiodorus, Bede, Peter Lombard, Hugh of St Victor and Peter Comestor. His learning extended to the arithmetic behind ‘the music of the spheres’: he offered the distance in miles between every planet, adding: ‘this is not for preaching but for knowing’ (‘Hec autem non sunt predicanda sed scienda’).<sup>33</sup> He also was a forceful writer. When he referred to the torture of prisoners in secular courts he told of the ‘shouting and confirming of the sentence’ by those who cry ‘let it be done, let it be done’ (‘fiat, fiat’).<sup>34</sup> And he compared the world’s cleansing in preparation for the Lord’s advent to the cleansing of a city’s streets in preparation for the arrival of a great king.<sup>35</sup>

The author introduced the Fifteen Signs as the fourth in a set of events to follow the death of Antichrist. First would come a time of ‘double consolation’: peace and spread of the faith; then a time for the penitence of those who wavered during the persecutions of Antichrist; then a time of apparent security during which one had to be watchful; and then the time of the ‘Fifteen Signs’.<sup>36</sup> Regarding the signs themselves he presented a composite. His first three derived from Peter Damian, his fourth from Damian or Pseudo-Bede, and his last eleven from Pseudo-Bede. The list might well have come from a model, but apparently new was his decision to attach apposite biblical passages to all of his signs.<sup>37</sup> The quotations confirmed the signs except for the fourteenth, which, as he repeated from Pseudo-Bede, was: ‘all men will die, so that they can rise again with the dead’.<sup>38</sup> Our author confronted this with 1 Thessalonians iv.15: ‘we

*On the antecedents* (now Biblioteca Casanatense, Rome, MS 2001) was owned by the seventeenth-century cardinal, Girolamo Casanati, a friend of Dominicans who founded the Dominican library in Rome, the Casanatense.

<sup>30</sup> I refer to Thomas Kaeppli, *Scriptores ordinis praedicatorum medii aevi*, Rome 1970–93, ii. 308, #2057B, and Biblioteca del Sacro Convento, Assisi, MS 635, which is the same work. <sup>31</sup> MS Vat. lat. 808, fo. 89va.

<sup>32</sup> *Chartularium Universitatis Parisiensis*, i, ed. Heinrich Denifle and E. Chatelain, Paris 1889, 486–7. <sup>33</sup> MS Vat. lat. 808, fo. 95vb. <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* fo. 92rb. <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* fo. 92va.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* fos 87va–88ra.

<sup>37</sup> The printed version attributed to St Thomas offers more supporting biblical passages than are located in the two manuscripts I have used.

<sup>38</sup> ‘omnes homines morientur, ut simul resurgant cum mortuis’: *Collectanea Pseudo-Beda*, 178; ‘morientur omnes vivi, ut simul cum mortuis resurgent’: Vat. lat. 808, fo. 88ra.

who are alive who remain at the advent of the Lord shall not precede them who are asleep', implying that this did not support the prediction that all will die. In addition he adduced Augustine, *City of God* xx. 20, which stated that before the Judgement all will receive immortality, as well as another passage in the same chapter wherein Augustine notes that some manuscripts reporting 1 Corinthians xv.51 bear the reading 'we shall all sleep'.<sup>39</sup> The author thus was exercising critical judgement and contradicting the prediction that all men will die in two different ways by referring to Scripture and to the *City of God*.<sup>40</sup>

Leaving Pseudo-Bede's fifteenth sign in place, he then delivered a thunder blow: 'These then are Fifteen Signs, but whether they transpire as I have posed or whether they entirely do not happen I do not assert, but as I find them I recite them.'<sup>41</sup> This Scholastic, suggesting that the Fifteen Signs may not happen, was not to be inveigled by tradition.

### *Hugo of Prato op*

The last author to be treated here is Hugo of Prato, a Dominican who studied theology in Naples in 1288/89, belonged to the Pisan Dominican convent in 1301 and died in Prato in 1322.<sup>42</sup> He produced a complete series of Sunday sermons on the Gospels and Epistles, including an Advent sermon to which he attached a consideration, 'ut de adventu ad iudicium', as a sort of appendix. Hugo's *Sermones dominicales* achieved enormous popularity in the later Middle Ages. One bibliography counts sixty-three manuscript copies, to which I can add four more.<sup>43</sup> The sermon series was also published in Strassburg shortly after 1478.<sup>44</sup>

Hugo introduced the Fifteen Signs into a sermon for the second Sunday of Advent on the text 'Erunt signa in sole' (Luke xxi.25). His first thirteen

<sup>39</sup> Augustinus, *De civitate Dei*, PL xxxix, bk xx. chap 20, n. 3 (cols 688–9), trans. H. Bettenson in Augustine, *City of God*, Harmondsworth 1972, 936.

<sup>40</sup> 'Sed super hoc verbum non aperte habetur quod omnes debeant mori, sed magis in immortalitatem mutandi, ut dicit glossa Augustini. Sed apostolus alibi dicit *Omnes quidem resurgemus*. Et secundum quod dicit Augustinus super illud I Thess. 4: *Nos qui vivimus qui residui sumus*, etc. Sed nonnulli codices habent *omnes dormiemus*': MS Vat. lat. 808, fo. 88ra. (The nineteenth-century edition is corrupt to the point of incomprehensibility.)

<sup>41</sup> 'Hec autem signa que sunt XV, utrum fiant per ordinem sicut posui, an quod omnino non fiant, non assero; sed sicut inveni, ita recito': *ibid*.

<sup>42</sup> Kaeppli, *Scriptores ordinis praedicatorum*, ii. 258.

<sup>43</sup> *Idem*. I add Ansbach, MS lat. 37; Erlangen, MS 578; Giessen, MS 756; and Melk, MS 666 (1653).

<sup>44</sup> *Sermones dominicales super evangelia et epistolas per totum annum fratris Hugonis de Prato ordinis predicatorum* (Hain, 8997). I cite from a copy owned by the Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal (incun. 1210) available at <[www.purl.pt/32455/1/index.html#/1/html](http://www.purl.pt/32455/1/index.html#/1/html)>.

signs were those of Peter Damian, although with minor divergences such as forty instead of fifteen cubits for the rising seas and a change in Damian's order for his signs from eleven through thirteen. As for his last two signs, these came closest to resembling signs thirteen and fifteen given by Pseudo-Bede. Unlike what we find in *De precedentibus*, Hugo's list eschews supporting biblical quotations.

After his listing of Fifteen Signs, Hugo proceeded to treat many other events and incidents to occur in the last days: the appearance of the 'two witnesses' Enoch and Elijah, the terrible reign of Antichrist and his ultimate destruction. But then he circled back to the Fifteen Signs and dismissed them in a way that offers a fitting conclusion to the present article:

After this status [the 'time of security' after Antichrist] there will be the status of signs that Jerome posited as are given above – if, however, they are true. For there is doubt about them among learned theologians. For some say that they are possible, and it seems possible that they so eventuate. But to some they seem entirely absurd, and they say that immediately after the previous time the world will be burned. The choice thus is left to the judgement of the preacher.<sup>45</sup>

Lodged in many manuscripts and a printed edition, Hugo of Prato's remark that the Fifteen Signs to some seem 'entirely absurd' reached a large audience and only reinforced a pattern of criticism among Dominicans. Nevertheless, the critical trend appears to have ended with Hugo and the signs remained integral to accounts of the last days in the later Middle Ages. Embedded in such standard texts as Peter Comestor's *Historia scholastica*, James of Voragine's *Legenda aurea*, Vincent of Beauvais's *Speculum historiale* and Nicholas of Lyra's postill on the Gospel of Luke they maintained their hold on late medieval imaginations.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup> 'Post hunc statum erit status signorum que ponit Hieronymus, que supradicta sunt, si tamen sunt vera. Nam de eis apud theologos doctores dubitatio est. Quidam enim dicunt quod possibilia sunt et possibile videtur ea sic evenire. Quibusdam autem videtur omnino absurdum et dicunt quod statim post prehabitu tempus mundus comburetur. Quidquid autem sit predicatoris arbitrio relinquatur': *ibid.* fo. 25<sup>v</sup>

<sup>46</sup> For the signs in Vincent of Beauvais and Nicholas of Lyra see Heist, *The Fifteen Signs*, 206–7.



## APPENDIX 1

*Guiral Ot's Signs*

Bibliothèque national de France, MS 8023, fos 59v–60r

Quibus omnibus factis et expeditis venient .xv. signa ante diem iudicii, que ostendent Deum esse venturum pro iudicando bonos et malos, quorum signorum quinque erunt ex parte aque vel humorum [vel humorum add. in marg.] et alia quinque erunt ex parte terre et alia quinque erunt de natura sua.

Unde nota quod ex parte aque vel humorum [vel humorum add. in marg.] erit primum signum quod aqua superabit omnes montes mundi alteriores terquinque cubitis vel terquinis cubitis. Unde non intelligas quod mare currat supra totam terram ter quinis cubitis sed erit alcior versus celum illis terquinis cubitis non excedendo metas suarum riparum, sed stabit mar versus celum erectum velut paries bonus stat.

Secundum signum erit quod aqua maris ita diminuetur versus yma quod non apparebit aliqua aqua. Ymo homo poterit transire mare sicco pede.

Tertium signum quod aqua maris reducetur ad equalitatem sicut prius.

Quartum signum erit quod pices et omnes bestie parve et magne maris congregabuntur super aquas et dabunt voces et gemitus quod nemo poterit noscere nisi solum Deus.

Quintum signum erit quod arbores et erbe sudabunt sanguinem, loco roris et humoris naturaliter nutrientis. Et sic erunt quinque signa ex parte humorum. [60r]

Nota quod ex parte terre erunt alia quinque signa, quorum primum erit quod omnia edificia quecumque sint corrudent penitus et omnino.

Secundum erit quod lapides debellabunt ad se invicem, sic quod unus lapis dividet alium et idem frangendet se ipsum in percussiendo alium.

Tertium signum erit quod fiet terremotus universalis, non talis qualis determinatur ab Aristotile, secundo *Meteorum*, qui fit propter inclusionem ventus in venis terre.

Quartum signum erit quod stelle cadent de celo, tamen aparenter quia erunt vapores accensi qui attingent terram sicut faciunt de nocte quando videntur currere.

Quintum signum erit quod montes aplanabuntur ita quod erunt equales planiciis.

Nota quod istud que secuntur fient ex natura sui. Primum erit quod ossa mortuorum exhibuntur de cepulcris et apparebunt sub diversis figuris.

Secundum signum erit quod gentes tantum timebunt quod non poterunt dare verbum.

Tertium signum erit quod ignis de celo sicut fulgura que sunt similia igni decendet, et sintille ibunt ab oriente ad occidente e converso.

Quartum signum erit quod homines et omnia que vivent illo [tempore] tunc morientur et in die iudicii omnes mortui resurgent.

Quintum signum erit quod ignis cremabit totam terram usque ad inferni novissimam.

Et similiter celum in quo mali angeli peccaverunt cremabitur et sic terra purgabitur, quod erit similis crystallo. Et omnes sordicies terre, aeris, ignis, et aque corruent in infernum supra capita dampnatorum. Et sic patet ordinatio signorum, tam ex parte aque quam ex parte terre et nature sue. Et ita ordinaverat Beatus Ieronimus et ista erunt ante diem iudicii.