On Jennifer Moreton’s edition of the *Compotus ecclesiasticus*

*Compotus*, as we learn from the opening line of the text presented here, was the medieval science of time, as defined by the motions of sun and moon. Another way of framing it, perhaps one more helpful for modern readers, would be to say that *computus*—or *compotus*, as twelfth- and thirteenth-century writers preferred to spell it—was both a type of text and a whole discipline, dedicated to calendars and the reckoning of time. For medieval clerics, a basic knowledge of *computus* was essential, for on its rules depended the whole ecclesiastical calendar with its two main technical components: the Julian calendar, inherited from pagan Rome, and a 19-year lunar cycle, which had been developed in the third to fourth century by the Church of Alexandria. During the early Middle Ages, the practical necessity of instructing Christian monks and clerics in the use of these reckoning tools created a steady demand for textbooks as well as short introductions to the subject, of which the present *Compotus ecclesiasticus* is a fairly representative early thirteenth-century example. In spite of its didactic aims and elementary content, the text offers a vivid picture of the breadth of knowledge conveyed in medieval *computus*-literature, which drew primarily on arithmetic and astronomy, but also interacted with fields such as theology, history, and etymology, sometimes even with astrology, geography, medicine, poetry, or music.¹

Owing to this interconnectedness, *computus* never remained completely static, but developed over the centuries in ways that reflect broader trends in medieval intellectual history. This is true especially for the twelfth century, when the discipline was enriched by astronomical data from newly translated Arabic, Hebrew, and Greek sources, among them numerical tables which allowed users to calculate the positions of the sun, moon, and planets.

¹ For a bibliography of works on medieval computistics and time-reckoning, see Faith Wallis, “Calendars and Time (Christian),” in *Oxford Bibliographies*, DOI: 10.1093/obo/9780195396584-0130.
with unprecedented precision. These texts and tables challenged existing assumptions and parameters and had the net effect of displacing *computus* as the main form of natural science in the Latin West, albeit without diminishing its practical importance for clerical education.\(^2\)

Most of our evidence for this transformative phase in the history of Latin computistics comes from England, in particular from the West Midlands and adjacent regions, where the ‘new’ astronomy and astrology of the Arabs penetrated relatively early, fostering significant changes in the curriculum and intellectual culture. One example is the episcopal town of Hereford, where Robert Grosseteste spent some of his formative years (1194/5–98) as a member of the household of Bishop William de Vere.\(^3\) Scholars and teachers active in William’s diocese included a certain Roger of Hereford, who played an important role in disseminating astrology and astrological techniques from Arabic sources in the second half of the twelfth century. Next to astrology, Roger also wrote a treatise on the *Compotus*, datable to 1176, in which he offered a comprehensive presentation and analysis of the two main branches of *computus*, dubbed *computus vulgaris* and *computus naturalis*. The former corresponded to the traditional approach to calendrical reckoning, where the fundamental unit of reckoning was the day, whereas the latter was a more fine-grained and recent variant of the discipline, which aimed at predicting the moment of conjunction down to the small fraction of an hour. By comparing both forms of the art to the much more complex and subtle knowledge furnished by Greco-Arabic astronomy, Roger was in a position to expose the technical flaws of the ecclesiastical calendar and to call for a reform of its 19-year cycle.\(^4\)

Robert Grosseteste, who was a generation younger than Roger of Hereford, carried this critical approach to the discipline even further in his widely copied *Compotus correctorius*,

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\(^2\) Three key texts from this period are edited in Lohr 2015. See on this topic also Nothaft 2014; 2015.


\(^4\) For details, see now the critical edition included in Lohr 2015.
which he probably wrote at some point in the 1220s.\textsuperscript{5} It was to have a seminal influence on later medieval discussions of calendar reform thanks to the lucid and comprehensive way in which it confronted the traditions of the \textit{computus} with the theories and parameters that Arabic sources had made available in the previous century.\textsuperscript{6} Even during his own lifetime, Robert Grosseteste enjoyed a great reputation as an expert on \textit{computus} and calendar-reckoning—so great in fact that scribes were soon tempted to ascribe other works from this genre to him. This appears to be what happened in the case of the present \textit{Compotus ecclesiasticus}, which in one manuscript, now in Oxford, is introduced as “the \textit{computus} of master Robert Grosseteste.”\textsuperscript{7} When S. Harrison Thomson prepared his influential survey of \textit{The Writings of Robert Grosseteste}, published in 1940, he labelled this work \textit{Compotus I}, supposing that it was Grosseteste’s first attempt at writing a \textit{computus} textbook, one later expanded into the more scientific \textit{Compotus correctorius}. In addition, he identified an abridged version of the \textit{Compotus I} in a manuscript in Dublin, designating the latter as \textit{Compotus minor}.\textsuperscript{8}

Although later scholars, notably Richard Southern and James McEvoy, disagreed with Thomson on several points of detail,\textsuperscript{9} the notion that the Bishop of Lincoln had authored at least two works on \textit{computus}—one ‘elementary’, and one ‘advanced’—was still generally accepted in 1988, when Bernard Malone submitted diplomatic editions of both the \textit{Compotus I} and \textit{Compotus minor} to fulfil his PhD requirements at the University of Southern California. Like his teacher Richard Dales, who published a note on “The Computistical

\textsuperscript{5} Thomson 1940, p. 96 lists 29 manuscripts of the work, two of which (London, British Library, Add. 27589 and London, British Library, Harley 3734) were used for the critical edition by Steele 1926, pp. 212–67.

\textsuperscript{6} I intend to document this influence in a forthcoming study on the history of calendar improvement in the Latin Middle Ages.

\textsuperscript{7} MS Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley 679, fols. 65r–75r.

\textsuperscript{8} MS Dublin, Trinity College, 411, fols. 104v–11r. See Thomson 1940, pp. 94–97, 106–7.

Works Ascribed to Robert Grosseteste” the following year, Malone came down in favour of Grosseteste’s authorship of the *Compons I*, which seemed to be vouchsafed by the repeated ascription in the Oxford manuscript.\(^\text{10}\) At the same time, however, both scholars already referred to new findings made by Jennifer Moreton (1939–2005), then a PhD student at Trinity College, Dublin, who had circulated an unpublished typescript entitled “Robert Grosseteste, John of Sacroboso, and the Calendar.” Moreton’s interest in the topic had been aroused by the physical presence of the *Computus minor* at her college library, leading her to seek out and find several further copies and versions of the *Computus I* in manuscripts of the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. Since all these additional copies were anonymous, she concluded that the ascription to Robert Grosseteste lacked solid foundations and had to be rejected. What these manuscripts contained instead was an anonymous *Comptoms ecclesiasticus*, which had been circulating in England since the early thirteenth century and which in Moreton’s view was reflective of the computistical lore taught to beginning students at the cathedral and university schools of the period.

Moreton expanded on these findings in her 1992 PhD-thesis, which also contained a critical edition of the *Comptoms ecclesiasticus*. Among the many difficult tasks she faced when analysing the text and its background was to determine the relationship between this anonymous English *Comptoms ecclesiasticus* and other works that routinely went by this name. These included the didactic poem *Massa compoti* by Alexander of Villedieu (fl. 1200) as well as the *Comptoms* (1232/35) attributed to the popular textbook writer John of Sacrobosco, which is also known as *De anni ratione*. One of Moreton’s most significant findings, discussed in an article she published in the journal *Viator* in 1994, concerned the conspicuous parallels in structure, content, and wording between Sacrobosco’s work and the *Comptoms ecclesiasticus*, which urged the conclusion that one text depended on the other. In her view, it was

\(^{10}\) See Malone 1988, pp. 8–16, and Dales 1989.
Sacrobosco who derived large parts of his work from the more rudimentary anonymous predecessor. An edition of a key passage from c. 13 of the *Compotus ecclesiasticus*, discussing the gradual slippage of the equinoxes and solstices due to the error of the Julian calendar, was included as an appendix to the article. This passage shows beyond doubt that the work was written after the year 1200, but its precise date—and whether it was really prior to Sacrobosco’s work—remains uncertain.

Moreton’s arguments against the involvement of Robert Grosseteste in the text’s history did not see the light of day until the following year (1995), when they were finally printed among the proceedings of a colloquium on Grosseteste’s thought and scholarship, which had been hosted by the Warburg Institute, London, in 1987. It seems fair to say that her view has become the generally accepted one and that scholars now regard only the *Compotus correctorius* as a work certainly by Grosseteste. Having erased two computus texts from the bishop’s CV (i.e., the *Compotus I/Compotus ecclesiasticus* and the *Compotus minor*), Moreton did the same for a widely copied *Kalendarium* with lunar almanac, which was treated by some medieval scribes as a work by Robert, the Bishop of Lincoln, and was published as such by Arvid Lindhagen in 1916. After this connection had already been called into question by Dales, Moreton refuted it more conclusively in an article with the programmatic title “Before Grosseteste”, published in *Isis* in 1995. It had the distinct merit of shedding light on two long-neglected texts written in twelfth-century England, both of them witnesses to the new influence of Greco-Arabic astronomy: the aforementioned *Compotus* of Roger of Hereford.

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12 A clearer verdict on this question will have to await the joint edition of Sacrobosco’s *Compotus* and the *Compotus ecclesiasticus* that is currently being prepared by Alfred Lohr.

13 McCluskey 1998, pp. 198–99; Panti 2001, pp. 46–47. The arguments of Moreton, Dales, and previous writers are reviewed at length by Dowd 2003, pp. 205–19, who comes down in Moreton’s favour.

14 Dales 1989, p. 78.
as well as a work written in 1175 by a certain Magister Cunestabulus (or Constabularius). As a result of engaging with these sources, she was able to show that the so-called Kalendarium Lincolniense (or Lincolniensis) already appeared in Roger’s treatise and hence could not possibly have been composed by Grosseteste.

Moreton was to return to the question of computistical antecedents two more times over the following years, with articles on the Venerable Bede’s “Doubts about the Calendar” (1998) and “The Compotus of ‘Constabularius’” (1999). In November 2000, she presented a concise summary of her previous research at the Thirty-Sixth Annual Conference on Editorial Problems in Toronto, which was dedicated to the works of Robert Grosseteste. The published version of this conference paper (2003) already announced that her edition of the Compotus ecclesiasticus “will be published shortly by the British Academy in the series Auctores Britannici Medii Aevi.”15 Sadly, her premature death in 2005 prevented Jennifer Moreton from overseeing this publication or from making further contributions to the historiography of medieval computistics.

The plan to include her Compotus ecclesiasticus in the Auctores Britannici series was at first maintained and the typescript was sent to Charles Burnett and Gillian Evans. In the form received, it included not only a critical edition of the text, but an English translation, an extensive introduction, a section-by-section commentary, and several appendices. Unfortunately, after the typescript had been examined by Charles Burnett, Immo Warntjes, and myself on two separate occasions in 2012 and 2015 and some attempts were made to edit it for publication, we had to reach the conclusion that the work was not polished and complete enough to go out in the intended book form. After consultation with the British Academy and her son Charles Moreton, we instead decided to respect Jennifer Moreton’s wishes by publishing her edition and translation of the Compotus ecclesiasticus in an online

15 Moreton 2003, p. 179 n. 2.
format. The apparatus of the edition, which follows after the translation, incorporates readings of six of the twelve manuscripts Jennifer Moreton had managed to identify, although the main text depends mostly on the thirteenth-century copy in MS London, British Library, Add. 27589. We have interfered as little as possible with Moreton’s edition and translation, correcting only obvious transcription errors as well as unifying the format. For all intents and purposes, this online edition thus represents the core sections of the work Jennifer Moreton had intended to publish before her death.

It remains for us to thank everyone involved in bringing this edition to light, in particular Faith Wallis, who recommended the *Ordered Universe* project to us, and Giles Gasper, who very readily and graciously offered to host the text on his project’s website. Although the text is no longer attributable to Grosseteste with any confidence, the *Compotus ecclesiasticus* remains a valuable witness to the intellectual and educational culture prevalent in England during his lifetime. We hope that it will serve scholars in their work and lead to further editions and investigations into the history of thirteenth-century *computus*.

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Bibliography:


