

# **The End of an Age: Vernacular Sunday Letters and Viking Raids in England and Ireland**

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The Sunday Letters are pseudo-epigraphical texts which claim to have been written by Jesus and exhort the reader to observe certain prohibitions every Sunday. The Letters were known in England from at least the ninth century. The earliest evidence for the Sunday Letter tradition in England is a letter from Bishop Ecgred of Lindisfarne to Archbishop Wulfsig of York. This letter makes reference to a certain Pehfred who had collected a Sunday Letter. The version of the Letter possessed by Pehfred seems to have been unique to England and Ireland, containing features found nowhere else in the Sunday Letter tradition. While the version of the Letter possessed by Pehfred does not survive, three related versions are known; two Old English Letters and the Old Irish *Epistil Ísu*. Four other Old English versions of the Sunday Letter are known. The Pehfred versions of the Letter differ greatly from these and all known version of the Sunday Letter. It is these Pehfred Letters which most clearly display a concern with raiders.

The use of the Sunday Letter tradition to discuss Viking raids has been considered. However, previous discussions have focused more on the content of the Letters and their place within the wider Sunday Letter tradition. A detailed study of the manuscript and historical context of the vernacular Letters suggests that the tradition was drawn on in response to Viking raids in some instances. For example, MS Cambridge Corpus Christi College 419, which contains two Old English Sunday Letters, shows explicit concern with Viking raids. This manuscript, which can be dated to the early eleventh century, but no earlier than 1010 AD, may in fact have been written in response to the Siege of Canterbury in September 1011. The Sunday Letters are found between two Wulfstanian homilies, *De*

*temporibus antichristi* and *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*. The historical and manuscript context of these Letters supports the argument that the Letters were used to respond to Viking raids.

This paper will consider in detail the Old English Sunday Letters as Anglo-Saxon productions and consider how they were adapted to discuss contemporary concerns, particularly Viking raids. The Pehtréd versions of the Letter will form the focus of this discussion, as they are uniquely found in England and Ireland. The Old English Pehtréd Letters are unique for a number of reasons, including their interest in a specific time and place, and engagement with a universal, Christian history. These Letters show a deep interest in Ireland and likely share a source with the Old Irish *Epistil Ísu*. This paper will investigate how the international Sunday Letter tradition was adopted and transformed into a distinct form in response to Viking raids in England and Ireland. Particular focus will be given to the manuscript and historical context of the Letters, considering how Viking raids contributed to the emergence of a unique branch of the Sunday Letter tradition across the Irish Sea.