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THE RECOVERY OF OLD ENGLISH
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THE ANGLO-SAXON PANTHEON
ACCORDING TO RICHARD VERSTEGEN
(1605)

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For T. A. Birrell

Anglo-Saxon paganism has exercised a strong fascination on generations of scholars, a fascination which is also shared by many students when they come to Old English literature.¹ The lasting interest may be illustrated by the fact that the most recent monograph on the subject, Gale Owen's *Rites and Religions of the Anglo-Saxons*,² has been twice reprinted since its appearance in 1981. One has the impression that scholarly curiosity concerning this aspect of Anglo-Saxon culture was aroused only with the Romantic Movement. At least, that is where Eric Stanley took the starting point for his exciting historiographical survey, *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism*.³ To be sure, a thorough and systematic study of Germanic mythology started only with Jacob Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie*, first published in 1835. Yet the pursuit of Anglo-Saxon paganism dates back all the way to the infant years of Anglo-Saxon studies.

¹I would like to thank Jan Bremmer and Bart Westerweel for their helpful comments on a draft of this essay.

²Owen (1981; repr. 1985 and 1996).

³Stanley (1975).

It was the former Oxonian Richard Verstegen (alias Verstegan alias Rowlands) who first extensively drew attention to the pre-Christian religion of the Anglo-Saxons in his *A Restitvtion of Decayed Intelligence in Antiquities. Concerning the Most Noble and Renovvmed [sic] English Nation*, printed at Antwerp by Robert Bruney in 1605. The title page also states that the book is to be sold "at London in Paules-Churchyard, by John Norton and John Bill."⁴ To the subject of the "idolatrie" of the Anglo-Saxons he devoted the greater part of chapter 3, entitled "Of the ancient manner of lyving of our Saxon anceters. Of the Idolles they adored whyle they were pagans . . ." (Table of Contents, p. [23]). Hitherto, Verstegen's *Restitvtion* has mainly received regard (and praise) amongst Anglo-Saxonists on account of his including an Old English glossary of well over nine hundred headwords; with the exception of the list of Old English legal terms appended to William Lambarde's *Archaionomia* of 1568, this was the first Old English glossary ever to be printed.⁵ Verstegen has even been credited with having seen the importance of the Conquest in the field of literary history by separating such authors as Chaucer and Gower from the authors of the Anglo-Saxon period whose language was less corrupted by loanwords.⁶ My paper seeks to redress this one-sided interest somewhat.

Who was the author of this successful book that saw reprints in 1628, 1634, 1652, 1655, and 1673,⁷ as well as two facsimile

⁴These were also the publishers of books by other antiquaries, e.g., William Camden.

⁵On Verstegen's achievements as lexicographer, see Goepf (1949); Schäfer (1982); and Schäfer (1989), 52. For a recent assessment of *A Restitvtion* as a whole, see Clement (1998), which came to my attention too late to be taken into account.

⁶See Glass (1982), 99.

⁷See Pollard and Redgrave (1976–91), II, nos. 21361–63; and Wing (1972–88), III, V269–71.

reprints⁸ in the seventies of our century? Richard Verstegen was born of mixed Dutch-English ancestry. His grandfather Theodore Rowlands Verstegen emigrated from Guelderland to England during the late years of Henry VII's reign, as Verstegen himself relates in the prefatory letter to the English nation.⁹ The exact date of Verstegen's birth is not known but can be postulated at ca. 1550. In 1565 we find him as a sizar at Christ Church, Oxford. According to the eighteenth-century Roman Catholic historian Charles Dodd,¹⁰ Verstegen devoted himself to the study of Anglo-Saxon and Gothic antiquities. Dodd's source of information in all likelihood was Anthony à Wood, who emphasized Verstegen's linguistic skills, calling him "a most admirable Critic in the *Saxon* and *Gothic* Languages."¹¹ Modern scholars concluded from such opinions that Verstegen studied Anglo-Saxon and Gothic while at Oxford,¹² but this is extremely unlikely. In 1565 not a letter of Gothic had been printed, and despite its many libraries, Oxford could not boast of possessing a single Gothic manuscript.¹³ Moreover, Oxford is not the place where in the 1560s the first

⁸*English Recusant Literature*, no. 323 (Ikkley: Scolar Press, 1971) and *The English Experience*, no. 952 (New York: Da Capo Press, 1979), respectively.

⁹*Restitvtion*, sig. ††1^r. The best book on Verstegen is still Rombauts (1933). For a succinct account, see the article by Anthony G. Petti in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, XIV (Washington, 1967), 627.

¹⁰See Dodd (1737–42), II, 428. Dodd is a pseudonym for Hugh Tootel.

¹¹Wood (1721), I, 502.

¹²Thus, for example, Rombauts (1933), 25–26, and Blom (1979), 17.

¹³The Uppsala Codex Argenteus, the sumptuously executed sixth-century manuscript containing the Gospels in the Gothic language, was discovered only around 1555, and the first sample from it, the text of the Lord's Prayer, was printed by Johannes Goropius Becanus some ten years later. On the early years of Gothic studies, see Van de Velde (1966) and Dekker (1999). Wood obviously meant "Germanic" when he wrote "Gothic," cf. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. *Gothic* (2).

steps were made on the path of Anglo-Saxon studies. Pioneers like Archbishop Matthew Parker and his secretary John Joscelyn, William Lambarde and Laurence Nowell—all were active in or around London. That is also where the first books with Anglo-Saxon texts were produced by the printer John Day, with the Anglo-Saxon type cast in bronze at the expense of Matthew Parker.¹⁴

What also speaks against Verstegen's alleged interest in Anglo-Saxon in those years is that the early study of the language was more or less a monopoly of Protestants, as appears from the publication of the Old English Gospels in 1571 and, slightly earlier in 1566, from Parker's tendentiously edited sermon by Ælfric on the significance of the Eucharist.¹⁵ As a staunch Roman Catholic, Verstegen would probably have been forced to leave the university in 1570 through unwillingness to take the Oath of Supremacy. In any event, he did not finish his studies with a degree. Verstegen returned to his native London, became a goldsmith, and acquired great skill as an engraver. In 1580, he appears in Paris, with his wife, as an exile from England for his involvement in anti-Protestant propaganda. After prolonged stays in Paris and Rome, he eventually settled in Antwerp in the early 1590s. Antwerp would be his main domicile for the rest of his long life. Verstegen died in 1640 at the age of about ninety years.

During his life, Verstegen proved to be a very productive author. His entire oeuvre numbers well over thirty titles.¹⁶ His first book was a kind of Baedeker guide to the major cities of Europe,

which he translated from German and augmented with information on their antiquity and origin. The majority of his books, however, are of a less innocent nature, as they were all part of his ardent attempts to further the cause of the Counter-Reformation. Before the appearance of his *Restitvtion* he had published no fewer than twelve books and pamphlets, of which three were in Latin, one in French, and the remaining eight in English. In most of these he exposed the atrocities allegedly committed by the Protestant English against innocent Roman Catholics. Some books were of a devotional character, such as his English edition and translation of the *Primer or Office of the Blessed Virgin*, published in 1599. For over a hundred years this was *the* book for clandestine Marian devotion in England.¹⁷

In this context of Counter-Reformationist activities, Verstegen's *A Restitvtion of Decayed Intelligence in Antiquities* is the odd man out. The book was dedicated to "the King's most excellent maiestie, James by the grace of God, King of Great Britain, France, and Ireland: defender of the faith." It almost looks like an act of impertinence that Verstegen, jailed "ffor religion" at the Poultry Counter prison in London in 1577,¹⁸ exiled from England around 1579 because of his Roman Catholic ideas, and the object of polemics by writers like Sir Francis Bacon,¹⁹ should dedicate his book to the Calvinist that James I was. The pious conclusion to his dedicatory letter, expressing the desire for "Almightie God (as in my daylie prayers I hold my self obliged) to bee your

¹⁴See Adams (1917), esp. ch. 1 and Appendix III; Bromwich (1962); and Lucas (1997a) and (1999).

¹⁵See Leinbaugh (1982).

¹⁶Bibliographies are given by Rombauts (1933), 298–319, including a list of works erroneously attributed to Verstegen; and Petti (1963). The latter is supplemented with a few items in Allison and Rogers (1989–94), I, 169–72 and 290, restricting themselves to Verstegen's polemical works only.

¹⁷Blom (1979), 16–19, 80–85, and passim.

¹⁸Rombauts (1933), 29 and n. 2.

¹⁹See Bacon's *Certain Observations Made upon a Libel Publishd This Present Year 1592 Entitled: A Declaration of the True Causes of the Great Troubles Presupposed to be Intended against the Realme of England* (London, 1592). Verstegen had (anonymously) published a pamphlet decrying the severe measures taken by Queen Elizabeth against the Roman Catholics; see Rombauts (1933), 84–89.

maiesties euer protector," looks downright hypocritical in the light of his other publications. What was Verstegen up to?

First of all, as Verstegen explains to the general reader, he had been moved to write his book by "the very naturall affection which generally is in all men to heare of the woorthynesse of their anceters, which they should in deed bee as desyrous to imitate, as delighted to vnderstand."²⁰ In other words, in holding up to the English nation a mirror in which they could see their distant past, Verstegen offered them an opportunity to reflect upon their present. In doing so the English might be able to improve whatever deviations they perceived from former laudable customs and usage of language.

Second, Verstegen explains, his book should be seen in a European perspective. Authors of many different countries had taken pains to describe the true origins of their nations, but for England such a study had yet to appear. In England the prevailing opinion still held that the English derived from the ancient British, i.e., Celts, and Verstegen makes abundantly clear, with some striking examples, to what misconceptions this error had led. Against these, Verstegen stated that the true descent of the English lay in Germany—to be precise, in Saxony. Indeed, Verstegen is the first in a line of historians whose aim it was to extol a Germanic England, contrasting it with an inferior Romanized Gaul. Tacitus, "a moste credit-woorthy wryter" (p. 40), is a crown witness in this new approach.²¹

To begin with, in chapters 1 and 2, Verstegen marshals the linguistic and historical evidence to bring out this point. Next, in chapter 3, he gives a detailed description of the way of life of the ancient Saxons, for example, how their society was divided into four classes, and how they used ordeals in their legal procedures. The remainder of this chapter is mainly taken up by a description of their pagan beliefs. In chapter 4, Verstegen deals with the

²⁰*Restitvtion*, sig. †3^v.

²¹See Weinbrot (1993), 178.

history of Britain until the end of the Roman era, while in chapter 5 he treats of the coming of the Anglo-Saxons and their conversion to Christianity. Chapter 6 gives an account of the coming of the Danes and Normans, respectively. The remaining three chapters are taken up entirely by linguistic matter, such as extensive etymological glossaries of English personal names and place names, and the aforementioned Old English glossary. This brief sketch of the contents of the *Restitvtion* will have made it sufficiently clear that Verstegen's work is the first in a long series to present a survey of Anglo-Saxon England in its cultural and linguistic settings. In this approach Verstegen clearly belongs to a broader antiquarian current.²²

Particularly interesting is what Verstegen has to say about the "idolatrie of the old pagan Saxons." In his account he first sets out to give a general characterization of their beliefs. In Verstegen's opinion, the ancient Saxons lived "according to the law of nature and reason," and through lack of knowledge of the true God, they worshipped idols. They were especially attentive to signs of nature before they went into battle, heeding, for example, the whinnying of horses and the flight of birds. As an illustration, Verstegen quotes on page 67 an incident from Flavius Josephus's *Antiquitates Iudaeorum*, but he leaves unmentioned that his account on page 68 of the custom of casting lots was taken almost verbatim from Tacitus's *Germania*, chapter 10. Such an omission is in line with his methodological approach, which in its casualness is sometimes irritating. Throughout his book, Verstegen is very generous with references to learned authors and their works. He often briefly indicates his debt by a marginal reference. Unfortunately, in doing so he rarely gives chapter and verse, which makes tracing his sources a cumbersome task. Tracking down copies of the books

²²See Levine (1987), esp. ch. 3: "The Antiquarian Enterprise, 1500–1800."

he quotes is another obstacle,²³ although I cannot escape from the impression that Verstegen does not always quote directly from the works he mentions but regularly derives his knowledge from secondary sources.

Concerning the gods which they shared with the other Germanic nations (p. 39), Verstegen claims that the Saxons adored many idols, which were different from those the Romans worshipped. Yet, some authors would have it that these were the same as the Roman gods, albeit with different names. Verstegen is here confronted with the *interpretatio Romana*, the approach used by Roman authors to replace the name of a Germanic god with the nearest equivalent of one of their own deities. According to Verstegen, seven gods were worshipped in particular amongst the Saxons, whose names have been preserved in the days of the week. These gods “according to their cours and properties I wil heer to satisfy the curious reader descrybe, both in portraiture and otherwise” (p. 68). We will see that in taking this approach, although on the right track, Verstegen was sometimes forced to make some curious assumptions with respect to the Anglo-Saxon pantheon. By presenting their portraiture, he flatly ignored Tacitus’s information that the Germans “nec cohibere parietibus deos neque in ullam humani oris speciem adsimulare ex magnitudine caelestium arbitrantur” (“do not think it in keeping with the divine majesty to confine gods within the walls or to portray them in the likeness of any human countenance”).²⁴ The temptation to enliven his account with pictures must have been too strong for Verstegen to resist.

²³I realize I have merely scratched the surface of Verstegen’s scholarly texture. I have used only the resources of the Leiden Universiteitsbibliotheek, the Koninklijke Bibliotheek in The Hague, and the Houghton Library, Harvard University.

²⁴Winterbottom and Ogilvie (1975), 42 (*Germania* 9.3).

The first god, then, whom the ancient Saxons adored in particular, was the Sun, whose name has been preserved in “Sunday.” His idol looked as follows (Fig. 9): his face was “as it

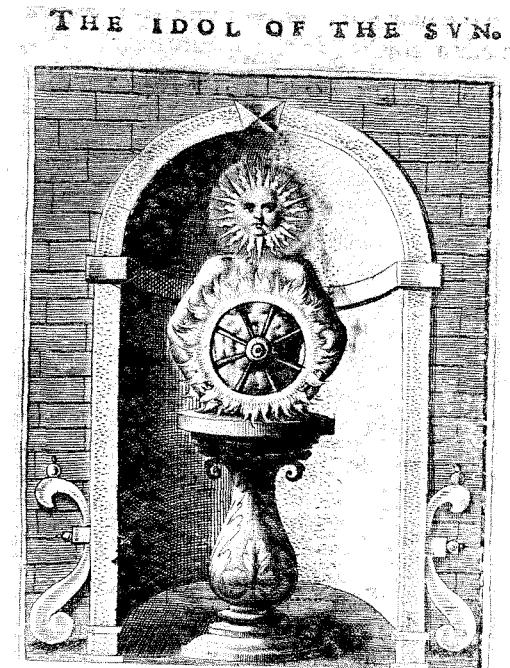


Figure 9. The idol of the Sun, from Richard Verstegen’s *A Restitvion of Decayed Intelligence in Antiquities* (1605), p. 69.

were, brightened with gleames of fyre,” and he held “a burning wheel before his brest” (p. 69). The wheel, according to Verstegen, signifies the course that the sun runs around the world, and the fiery gleams, the light and heat with which he warms everything that lives and grows. Such an interpretation of the attributes of the gods, which makes up a significant component of Verstegen’s account of the gods, betrays the fact that some of the accompanying engravings (which he made himself) were influenced by emblem

literature, a genre becoming very fashionable in the Low Countries at the time. Verstegen was a skilled engraver, as we have noted above, and was also connected with contemporary emblem literature.²⁵ Though, in contrast to what is usual in emblem literature, Verstegen does not draw any moralistic conclusions from his illustrations, it is clear that they are charged with an allegorical symbolism that is also characteristic of emblem literature.

The Moon, he writes, was their second god, as the name “Monday,” for “Moonday,” makes clear. The form of this idol (see Fig. 10), according to Verstegen, “seemeth very strange and ridiculous,” for “beeing made for a woman shee hath a short cote lyke a man” (p. 70). And he continues: “more strange it is to see her hood with such two long eares.” She holds a mirror before her breast (as the sun god held a fiery wheel before his) to “expresse what shee is.” In emblem literature, we regularly find the moon depicted as a mirror, to indicate it receiving its light from the sun.²⁶ Remarkably enough, Verstegen pretends to be unable to explain all her attributes, as he confesses to have been unsuccessful in finding the reason for the hood with long ears, the short coat, and the pointed shoes. It seems to me that Verstegen is here mystifying his account on purpose. His inability to give a meaning to these attributes only serves to enhance the veracity of the depiction. As a matter of fact, the pointedness of the shoes is totally irrelevant, as Woden, Thor, and Friga are likewise depicted with such shoes.

²⁵Verstegen provided the English text for the Latin poems in Otto van Veen’s *Amorum emblemata, figuris aeneis incisa studio Othonis Vaeni, Batavo-Lugdunensis. Emblemes of Love, with Verses in Latin, English, and Italian* (Antwerp, 1608). See Daly and Silcox (1990), 79–80, and Bath (1992), 35–36. On the collaboration between Van Veen and Verstegen, see also Porteman (1996), 7–9.

²⁶See Henkel and Schöne (1967), I, 30–39 (moon), and II, 1350 (mirror with moon).

THE IDOL OF THE MOON.



Figure 10. The idol of the Moon, from Verstegen’s *Restitvion*, p. 70.

Donkey’s ears, though, signify folly and reflect the moon’s lack of constancy.²⁷

The third god to make his appearance is Tuisco, “the moste ancient and peculiar God of all the Germans” (p. 71), who gave his name to Tuesday. This etymology of Tuesday, of course, is no longer accepted, Verstegen being as yet ignorant of the existence of the god Tiw. But as Tacitus had given such a prominent place

²⁷For donkey’s ears, see Henkel and Schöne (1967), II, 1605–06. Inconstancy is one of the many notions the moon could represent: see, e.g., Ripa (1603), 225 (*Inconstanza*). Ripa links the moon with folly on p. 478 (*Stoltitia*). See also Picinelli (1681), s.v. *luna*; Picinelli’s index is reprinted in facsimile in Henkel and Schöne (1967), II, 2113–96, where the entry for *luna* occurs in col. 2159.

to Tuisco/Tuysco (or Tuisto—there being some confusion about the correct version of the name), and as his name superficially resembles that of Tuesday, the equation was easily made. His picture (Fig. 11) receives little explanation. The only thing Verstegen remarks is that Tuisco is wearing a “garment of a skin, according to the most ancient manner of the Germans clothing.”

THE IDOL TUYSCO.



Figure 11. The god Tuisco, from Verstegen's *Restitvion*, p. 71.

For this particular piece of information on their dress, Verstegen relies on Tacitus (*Germania*, ch. 17). The Tower of Babel, which can be discerned in the distance, is a silent reference to chapter 1 (pp. 9–13) of his book, in which Verstegen had extensively dealt with Tuisco. As Noah's great-great-grandson, the god had led the eponymous *Tuytsen* or Germans from Babel to Europe, as is also

shown in the picture. The sceptre which Tuisco is wielding symbolizes his rulership. Verstegen's linking of the Tacitean Tuisco to the biblical story of Babel goes back to the Fleming Johannes Goropius Becanus, who in his *Origines Antwerpianae* (1569) devoted a good deal of attention to the etymology of *Teutsch* or *Dutch*, which he saw as a derivative of the name Tuisco,²⁸ a point on which Verstegen follows him. The linking of Tuisco to Noah—the urge to connect pagan ancestors with a biblical progenitor should not surprise Anglo-Saxonists—starts with Anniius of Viterbo's *Commentaria super opera diversorum auctorum de antiquitatibus loquentium* (“Commentaries on the Works of Various Authors Discussing Antiquities”), an influential and brilliant forgery if ever there was one.²⁹

With Woden, Verstegen arrives on more solid ground. This god, he says, was worshipped among the Saxons as their god of battle, as was Mars among the Romans. Woden's idol represents a man in full armour (Fig. 12). Verstegen gives a euhemeristic explanation of the god, saying that during his life he was “a most valiant and victorious Prince” (p. 72), but was after his death honored as a deity. The human sacrifices he mentions are silently lifted from Tacitus's *Germania*, chapter 9, where Tacitus notes that the Germans offered human sacrifices to Mercury, whom he describes as their most important god. Verstegen, however, rejects the view of some that Woden was the Germanic equivalent of Mercury, for “*Mercurie* among the Romans neuer was” a god of war (pp. 79–80). Verstegen remarks that the name Woden “signifieth fiers or furious” (which echoes Adam of Bremen's

²⁸Becanus (1569), 460.

²⁹(Rome, 1498). See Grafton (1990); and Asher (1993), ch. 2. Anniius makes Berosus the author of one of his major (fictitious) sources. Verstegen mentions Berosus as an authority on p. 11, albeit with some reservation: “if hee of some so called be the same, & so capable of credit.”

remark “Wodan, id est furor”),³⁰ and he is the first to my knowledge to link the god’s name with the English adjective *wood* (“insane”). “*Wedensday*/ in steed of *wodensday*” still preserves the name of the god. Elsewhere in the *Restitvtion*, on page 81, Verstegen lists a number of English place names which contain the god’s name as evidence of his worship: “*wodnesborough* in kent, *wodnesfeild* in Stafordshyre, *wodnesbeorgh* or *wannes-dytche* in

THE IDOL WODEN.



Figure 12. The god Woden, from Verstegen’s *Restitvtion*, p. 72.

wilshyre, &c.” Using onomastics as a method to recover Anglo-Saxon pagan sanctuaries, so familiar to us now,³¹ was certainly a novelty around 1600.

Thor (see Fig. 13) is identified as the most powerful of the gods, and the governor of the winds and the clouds, lightning and thunder. His idol is accordingly placed in a very large and spacious hall, where he sat “as yf he had reposed himself vpon a

THE IDOL THOR.



Figure 13. The god Thor, from Verstegen’s *Restitvtion*, p. 74.

³⁰Schmeidler (1917), 258.

³¹In our century, important contributions in this respect were made by Sir Frank Stenton, Bruce Dickins, Eilert Ekwall, and Margaret Gelling. For an account of the “state of the art,” see Gelling (1973).

covered bed. On his head he wore a crown of Gold," and around his head "were set or fixed twelve bright burnished golden stars. And in his right hand he held a kingly scepter" (p. 74). His name is preserved in "Thursday," which the Danes and Swedes still call *Thorsday*. In the Netherlands, according to Verstegen, it is called *Dundersdag*, which corresponds to English "Thursday." From this Verstegen concludes (not surprisingly) that Thor was the god of thunder. As corroborative evidence he cites the form *Thunresdeag* [*sic*] as he had found it "in some of our old Saxon books." Unfortunately, he gives no more precise identification of his source.

The next in line is the goddess Friga (Fig. 14). Curiously, Verstegen interprets her as a hermaphrodite, probably on account of her holding a sword in her right hand and a bow in her left. The two weapons, he says, signify that both women and men should be ready to fight in times of need. Her name is preserved in "Friday," which the Anglo-Saxons called *Frigedeag*.

Undoubtedly the most fanciful god is Seater (Fig. 15). His idol is placed on the sharp prickled back of a perch. In his right hand he holds a pail with flowers and fruits, signifying the fertility he was supposed to bring. The wheel in his left hand symbolizes "the knit vnitie and conioyned concord of the Saxons, and their concurring together in the running one course" (p. 79). The girdle waving in the wind indicates the freedom of the Saxons. His name, unsurprisingly, is preserved in "Saturday."

Surveying Verstegen's discussion of what he took to be the seven most important gods, we can see how he proceeded. He structured his account on the names of the days of the week, which forced him to posit a god for each of these. Consequently, he had to invent at least three gods—the sun, the moon, and Seater—that we no longer recognize as Germanic gods.³² They had their origin

in the fact that some time before the close of the fourth century the Germans adopted the Roman names of the weekdays in a partly literally translated and partly adjusted form. Verstegen was probably not aware of this, and the ease with which he recreates this part of the Germanic past of the English sharply contrasts with his polemic tone in the introduction to his book and elsewhere, where he makes short shrift of all kinds of spurious and unfounded opinions of fellow historians.

THE IDOL FRIGA.



Figure 14. The goddess Friga, from Verstegen's *Restitvion*, p. 76.

³²Despite the testimony of Caesar in his *De bello Gallico*, VI, 21 (Edwards [1917], 344–45), who claimed the celestial bodies as deities for the Germans. Verstegen would have been familiar with this report.

His accounts of Woden, Thor, and Friga contain in embryonic form what we still know of them. The reason why Verstegen appears more knowledgeable about these gods is that he took most of his information directly from Olaus Magnus's impressive history of Scandinavia, *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus*.³³ Not

THE IDOL SEATER.



Figure 15. The god Seater, from Verstegen's *Restitvion*, p. 78.

only does Verstegen adopt the description of the three gods, he also copies the etymologizing of the names of the weekdays. Olaus even provided inspiration for Verstegen's pictures of the gods, for, as a comparison with Olaus's illustration of the three shows (Fig. 16), Verstegen's portraits derive much of their iconography

³³(Rome, 1555), 100–01.



Figure 16. Friga, Thor, and Woden, from Olaus Magnus's *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* (1555), p. 100.

from it.³⁴ Whereas Olaus had grouped all three gods together, Verstegen gives each of them a separate picture, to accord with the general set-up of his account.

To be sure, from the point of view of our present state of knowledge, Verstegen often erred in his analysis of the Saxon gods. Yet we must give him credit for his innovative contribution to the mythography of Anglo-Saxon paganism. No one before him had devoted so much attention to Anglo-Saxon paganism. The impact he made is almost immediately discernible. When William Camden brought out the enlarged edition of his *Britannia* in 1607, he had added a whole chapter on the Anglo-Saxons, including a brief account of their pagan gods, which demonstrably contained elements that he took from Verstegen although he did not

³⁴The engraving in Olaus's book was copied from an earlier work. The picture ultimately goes back to Hans Holbein the Younger; see Granlund (1976), I, 354–55.

acknowledge him.³⁵ Acknowledgment was made by John Speed in his *History of Great Britaine under the Conquests of the Romans, Saxons, Danes and Normans*, which appeared in 1611, and which includes a section on the pagan gods.³⁶ Even the great antiquary Sir Robert Bruce Cotton sent his “commendations” to Verstegen in Antwerp, an honor that Verstegen returned by sending Sir Robert a fossilized fish tongue found in Flemish soil.³⁷ Anthony à Wood, in his *Athenae Oxonienses*, adequately sums up the prevailing opinion of Verstegen in the seventeenth century when he says that he was “a great reviver of our *English Antiquities*.”³⁸

Verstegen was a shrewd man. In 1613 he published a book in Antwerp called *Nederlantsche Antiquiteiten*, that is, “Dutch Antiquities.” In this slim volume he recycled large portions of his *Restitvtion of Decayed Intelligence*. This time it is not the Anglo-Saxons but the Dutch who are given the history of their origins. In his account of their conversion to Christianity by the English missionary St. Willibrord, Verstegen includes almost verbatim his discussion of the pagan Saxon gods, pictures and all. This book, however, was written with a purpose entirely different from that of its English predecessor. Whereas the *Restitvtion* of 1605 at first sight is a neutral, objective book, its Dutch remake of 1613 is outspokenly anti-Protestant in tone.³⁹ Following upon his account of the conversion, Verstegen embarks in chapter 6 on an extended lamentation over the religious convictions of the Dutch who have turned either Calvinist, Lutheran, or Mennonite, a passage that

³⁵Camden (1607), esp. 96–97. There are also similarities between Verstegen’s etymologies of “our Saxon proper names,” listed in his eighth chapter, and Camden’s “Anglo-Saxonum nomina” on pp. 99–101.

³⁶Speed (1611), 200–04.

³⁷Letter of 15 June 1609, BL MS Cotton Julius C. iii, item 47, fol. 376, printed in Petti (1959), 266; and Rombauts (1933), 327.

³⁸Wood (1721), I, 502.

³⁹See Buitendijk (1942), ch. 7: “Richard Verstegen,” esp. 162–63.

reads as one long cry from the heart: “Oh, if only a new Willibrord would come to bring them back to the bosom of the Church!”

The Dutch version proved even more successful than the *Restitvtion*. It was reprinted in the Roman Catholic Southern Netherlands in 1631, 1646, and 1662. But even in the Northern Netherlands, people realized its intrinsic values. In 1700, an adapted version under the title *Antiquitates Belgicae of Nederlandsche Oudheden: zijnde d’eerste opkomst van Holland, Zeeland, ’t Sticht Utrecht . . .* was published in Amsterdam, stripped of its anti-Protestant passages, and brought up to date with the latest state of knowledge by the publisher-bookseller Jacob van Royen. The book contained very good copies of Verstegen’s engravings of the gods and was further embellished with a number of engravings of various Germanic tribesmen and ruined medieval castles. Reprinted in 1701, it was succeeded by further reprints in 1705, 1714, 1725, 1733, and 1756. The 1756 reprint, again slightly updated, was furnished with some more illustrations. One of these, appearing between pages 114 and 115, is of a “Church Service of the Ancient Germans” (Fig. 17). Here we see Verstegen’s representations of the sun god and the moon god in an imaginative context. The last dated edition, with an updated appendix but without illustrations, appeared in 1809,⁴⁰ while an undated edition, which stuck more closely to the text of the 1613 edition (without the anti-Protestant polemic, but with Roman Catholic devotional passages), came out around 1830.⁴¹ It contains crude imitations of the original divine portrait gallery. In other words, Verstegen’s work, if in slightly adapted versions, managed to bridge more than two hundred years. Generations of scholars and interested readers had imprinted upon their minds a textual

⁴⁰Printed in Ghent by C. J. Fernand.

⁴¹Printed in Brussels by P. J. de Haas; see Petti (1963), item 14j.

and pictorial representation of the Anglo-Saxon/Germanic gods that was basically conceived in Verstegen's creative and learned imagination.



Kerkplegigheden der Germaanen.

Figure 17. Scene illustrating a "Church Service of the Ancient Germans," from the 1756 reprint of *Antiquitates Belgicae*, between pp. 114 and 115.

The attraction of Verstegen's work lay partly in the illustrations with which he had furnished it. In the opinion of William Nicolson, bishop of Carlisle (1702–18), the *Restitvion* "is handled so plausibly, and so well illustrated with handsome cuts, that the book has taken and sold very well."⁴² The verbo-visual impact of the Dutch version is particularly apparent from engravings that

⁴²Quoted after Dodd (1737–42), II, 428.

illustrate sections on paganism in later books, especially in the Low Countries and Germany.⁴³ Thus in a book which deals with the antiquities of Leiden, we find a long section on the pagan gods accompanied by their images (Fig. 18).⁴⁴ A magnificent historical

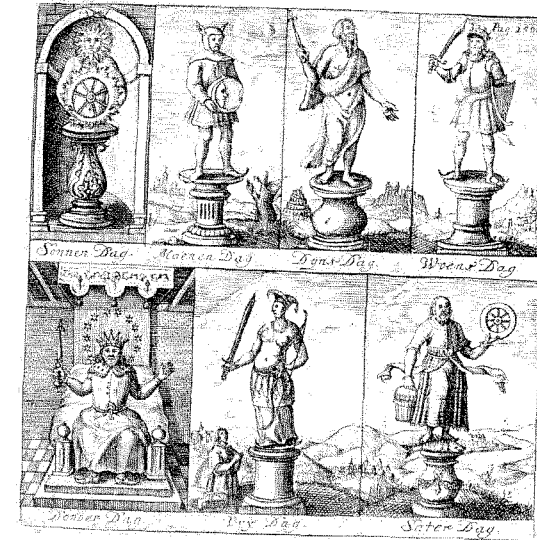


Figure 18. The Germanic gods, from Simon van Leeuwen's *Korte besgryving van het Lugdunum Batavorum nu Leyden* (1672), between pp. 250 and 251.

atlas in folio format, intended for a Francophone readership, reproduces yet another adaptation of Verstegen's pantheon (Fig. 19, a

⁴³See Van de Waal (1952), I, 168–69 and 206, plus the relevant footnotes in vol. II. I owe this reference to Paul Hoftijzer. Whether or not Verstegen's portraits of the gods had a similar iconographic influence in Britain I cannot say.

⁴⁴Van Leeuwen (1672), 250–51 (plate). The verbal description of the gods on pp. 246–55 is based almost word for word on Verstegen's 1613 Dutch remake of the *Restitvion*.



Figure 19a and b. The Germanic gods, from Henri Chatelain's *Atlas historique, ou nouvelle introduction à l'histoire, à la chronologie et*



à la géographie ancienne et moderne (1721), I, plate 42. The two parts of the figure show the upper and lower portions of a single page.



Figure 20. The god Crodo, from the second edition of Elias Schedius's *De diis Germanis* (1728), between pp. 736 and 737.

and b).⁴⁵ A curious wanderer is the engraving of Seater that emerges in the second edition of Elias Schedius's learned treatise on the Germanic gods (Fig. 20).⁴⁶ The first edition, which had

⁴⁵Chatelain (1721), I, plate 42.

⁴⁶Schedius (1728), 736–37.

appeared with Elzevier's in Amsterdam in 1648, had to do without such embellishments. In a chapter dealing with eight minor (now deemed spurious) gods, Schedius includes Crodo, whom he takes to be a version of Saturn. The description of his attributes and the explanation of them are a direct translation of Verstegen's account, without acknowledgment of the source. The last creative adaptation I have found was made by the prolific Dutch engraver Jacob Buys in an encyclopedic work on the history of the Netherlands.⁴⁷ The picture (Fig. 21) records St. Willibrord's destruction of a sanctuary dedicated to Woden, an episode found for the first time in Alcuin's *Vita sancti Willibrordi*, chapter 14,⁴⁸ but recounted numerous times in Dutch history books. In the foreground we see the missionary instructing a group of recent converts to demolish an idol of Woden which is a replica of Verstegen's engraving. One can hardly think of a better illustration of Richard Verstegen's long-lasting impact on the popular perception of Germanic paganism.

Verstegen's polemic Dutch remake of the *Restitvion* in 1613 may give us a clue to the deeper motives that underlay the writing of this book. Is the *Restitvion* really a non-religious work, as Petti wants us to believe?⁴⁹ Verstegen's prominent role in the Roman Catholic attempts to turn the tables in England to Rome's advantage should not be underestimated. By 1593 he had received special permission from the Jesuit headquarters in Rome to read "heretical books."⁵⁰ Verstegen knew all too well what to do with the fruit of his reading:

⁴⁷Kok (1785–96), XXXIV, plate II, facing p. 112.

⁴⁸See Krusch and Levison (1920), 128. Alcuin's original account speaks only of the destruction of an idol, without identifying it as an image of Woden.

⁴⁹See Petti's *New Catholic Encyclopedia* article (cited in n. 9 above).

⁵⁰See Rombauts (1933), 66–67.



HET AFGODSBEELD WODAN TE WESTKAPPEL, DOOR WILLEBRORD, VERBRIJZELD.

Figure 21. St. Willibrord orders the destruction of an idol of Woden, from Jacobus Kok's *Vaderlandsch Woordenboek* (1785–96), XXXIV, plate II, facing p. 112.

me thinckes I could oute of sundry our late Englishe hereticall books (for I have licence to read them as also others) drawe foorthe very espetiall matter to move any indifferent Protestant to become doubtfull of the truthe in either the Puritane or Protestant religion.⁵¹

As I have now come to see it, the *Restitvtion* is a subtle attempt to show the English in 1605 that their Anglo-Saxon ancestors only gained happiness when they accepted the faith as it was preached by St. Augustine, the man sent by Pope Gregory the Great. Nowhere in the book is there one disparaging remark to be found on the Roman Catholic Church or its representatives. Admittedly, there is also no open praise for the contemporary Church of Rome. Occasionally, though, papal action is mentioned with barely concealed approval, as when Verstegen concludes his discussion of the legal custom of ordeals by having Pope Stephen II “vtterly” abolish “these tirrible kyndes of trials” which had “their beginnings in paganisme, and were not thought fit to bee continewed among Christians” (p. 67). And just as the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons is very much the substance of Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica*, likewise this episode in Anglo-Saxon history plays a pivotal part in chapter 7. Verstegen realized that he had to be brief in his account of the missionaries and their good message of salvation, so he concludes:

Suche as are desyrous more particularly to vnderstand of the true manner and forme of the religion, and seruice wherevnto this our first christian English king and his people were conuerted, may for their further satisfaction therein haue recours vnto *Venerable Bede*, and all ancient authors that thereof haue written.⁵²

⁵¹Letter of 30 April 1593 to Father Robert Persons, S. J., printed in Petti (1959), 142. Verstegen even used Chaucer for his polemics; see Petti (1959), 143 n. 3.

⁵²*Restitvtion*, 145–46.

This is as close as Verstegen gets to saying “all these newfangled Protestant ideas are wrong. Return to the doctrine of the Fathers. Come back to Rome!” Slightly further down, a marginal summary draws attention to “The frutes of the conuersion of our ancient kings.” What are these fruits? That “Churches Chappels and Monasteries were erected to the seruice of God,” and that “they buylded Colleges and Schooles for the encrease of learning.” Verstegen notes expressly on page 146 that charters were often signed with a cross, in all likelihood a hidden allusion to the Act of 1571 which prohibited, on pain of forfeiture of property and exile, the import of “any token or tokens, thing or things, called by the name of *Agnus Dei*, or any crosses, pictures, beads, or suchlike vain and superstitious things from the Bishop or See of Rome.”⁵³ St. Augustine’s deliberations before King Æthelberht of Kent provided Verstegen with a good excuse to depict monks in action, with several attributes now banished from England such as a cross with a banner depicting the crucified Christ flanked by two haloed figures, most likely St. John and the Virgin Mary (Fig. 22). Augustine’s path to Æthelberht’s heart had of course been somewhat paved by the king’s Christian wife, who had with her “the chaste and vertuous Bishop *Luidheard*” (p. 140). The bishop’s chastity, not mentioned by Bede, probably alludes to the state of celibacy for clergymen, propagated by Rome but rejected by the Protestants. Whenever Verstegen quotes from the Bible, he does so in Latin in accordance with Roman Catholic practice; in fact these are the only passages in that language in the entire book.⁵⁴ No reference is made to the fact that at least the Gospels had been translated into Anglo-Saxon, although Verstegen must have been aware of John Foxe’s edition of 1571. Such information

⁵³See Tanner (1930), 149.

⁵⁴Biblical quotations in Latin occur, e.g., on pp. 8, 95, and 96 and are sometimes provided with a translation. The Roman Catholic Doway version of the Vulgate had not yet appeared.

THE MANNER OF THE FIRST BRINGING
and preaching of the Christian faith, vnto
Æthelbert king of Kent.



Figure 22. St. Augustine of Canterbury preaches before King Æthelberht of Kent, from Verstegen’s *Restitvtion*, p. 144.

apparently had to be suppressed. And the only time Verstegen mentions Martin Luther is to expose the Reformer’s ignorance in claiming that England was a part of Germany: “but heerof he makes his own fancie his author, for other author of more antiquitie then himself hee can fynd none” (p. 156).⁵⁵ So much for Luther!

In short, it is true that *A Restitvtion of Decayed Intelligence* is Verstegen’s only really scholarly work—indeed it displays his

⁵⁵In the margin, Verstegen refers to “Io. Aurifaber in Luthers Tyschreden,” undoubtedly one of the “heretical books” Verstegen was allowed to read, cf. p. 167 and n. 50 above.

wide-ranging reading and critical attitude.⁵⁶ We sense in his account of the historical and linguistic past of Anglo-Saxon England an engagement with contemporary political and scholarly concerns that has long since disappeared from the discipline.⁵⁷ At the same time, the book reveals at another level a subtle discourse of Counter-Reformation propaganda. Strangely enough, this polemic aspect of the *Restitvion* has been overlooked until now.⁵⁸ As a distant mirror, a reading of the book may help us to put the “objectivity” of our own work on Anglo-Saxon paganism into a proper perspective.

⁵⁶That Verstegen contemplated an augmented second edition shows his continuing interest in the subject. He was eager to know what Sir Robert Cotton would think of such an undertaking; see his letter to Sir Robert of 6 October 1617, printed in Petti (1959), 268–69.

⁵⁷Compare Frantzen (1990), ch. 2: “Origins, Orientalism, and Anglo-Saxonism in the Sixteenth and Nineteenth Centuries.”

⁵⁸The work is not listed by Allison and Rogers (1989–94).