Sunday, day of feast or holy day – on the choice of Old English equivalents of Latin sabbat in the Lindisfarne Gospels

1. Introductory statements

The present paper examines the relation between the Latin word sabbat and its English equivalents used in the tenth century gloss translation to the Lindisfarne Gospels. The analysis involves the identification of all English correspondents of the Latin item with the aim of establishing the hierarchy of their frequency and the comparison of contexts in which those Old English items are employed to identify potential differences in their use. A more general purpose of the study is to discuss the methods of translation used in the glosses and discover any consistencies behind the choice of native vocabulary.

2. Gloss translation

Glossing was a popular method of translation of Latin texts in the Old English period. It generally involved the insertion of a native equivalent in-between the lines (interlinear glosses) or at the margins of the original text (marginal glosses). The glosses were “basically source-oriented... designed to reveal as much as possible of the form and content of the original message” (Nida 2004: 161). Thus, the aim of that technique was mainly to “facilitate the understanding of a given passage, or a given term in particular” (Dembowski 1997: 113) rather than produce a coherent translation of the text. Consequently, apart from including a word-to-word translation, the glosses also contain additions and explanations since the scribes often “added a note... between the lines or in the margins” (Toon 1992: 423) whenever they encountered a difficult word or phrase. Moreover, the glossators, who actually performed the function of translators, occasionally put several variants to gloss one item, for instance,
when its meaning was ambiguous. Hence, glosses are an invaluable source of information about the relation between the lexis of the source and target languages.

3. The Lindisfarne Gospels

The Lindisfarne Gospels, contained in manuscript British Library Cotton Nero D. IV, is a collection of English interlinear glosses to the four gospels added by priest Ælred in the mid-tenth century. The gospels are one of few illustrations of the Northumbrian dialect which survived to Modern times and an excellent example of a gloss translation. The comparison of the original Latin text with its English translation has shown that Ælred’s glosses were not “one-to-one mechanical renderings, but rather conscious, occasionally very careful “interpretative translations” (Nagucka 1997: 180). He quite often diverged from the original text changing the word order, introducing words, or suggesting several terms for one Latin item. The variants provided usually include different inflectional forms or, especially in the case of nouns, synonyms.

The present analysis focuses on the translation of the word sabbat into Old English. The word is believed to be an adequate item to test the translator’s creativeness since, on the one hand it is usually associated with Saturday, on the other hand it refers to the holy day, which for Christians means Sunday.

4. Sabbat and its Old English equivalents

The word sabbat derives from the Hebrew word shabbath meaning “to rest” (cf. Skeat 1893) and denotes “the seventh day of the week (Saturday)” (OED). As such, in entered Latin and later served as the source of words for Saturday in many modern languages, including Spanish sábado, Portuguese sabado, Italian sabato, French samedi, or German Samstag. It also entered English, originally as the name of religious rest for Israelites. Later, it acquired other meanings such as e.g. ‘a midnight meeting of demons, sorcerers and witches’ (OED). Yet, it never replaced the word for Saturday since all names of weekdays in English are “the most obvious pagan fossils... which derive from Classical and Scandinavian deities, or supposed planetary influence” (Hughes 200: 85). Hence, Saturday, OE seternes dæg, is literally ‘day of Saturn’.
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4.1. One-to-one relation

In the whole text of the Lindisfarne Gospels, Latin sabbat occurs 55 times and is glossed by several different Old English items. Typically, the word is glossed by a single item. One of the most frequent equivalents is sunnandæg ‘Sunday’ (17 occurrences), employed in its various inflectional forms; cf.:

(1)

Lat.: Aut non legistis in lege quia sabbatis sacerdotes in templo sabbatum uiolant et sine crimine sunt...

OE: vel ne leornade ge in æ forþon sunnadagum measapreostas in tempel sunnadæg hia widlas & buta hehsynne sint...

ModE: Or haven't you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent? {Mt 12:5}

The use of Sunday for sabbath is obviously the case of domestication. Sabbath was observed by Israelites as the day of rest, when all work was prohibited. The notion presumably originates in the passages from Genesis in which proclaim the seventh day as the day of God’s rest (cf. Harvey 2004: 316). Thus, the seventh day, mainly Saturday, is still a holy day in Judaism as “the principal reminder of God and paramount preserves of the faith” (Block 1978: 6). In Christianity, however, the holy day is Sunday, the day of the resurrection of Jesus. Thus, the translator’s decision to gloss sabbat as Sunday, apparently results from the wish to use a word recognizable by the audience as a holy day.

Interestingly, although the word sunnandæg was an established compound of sun ‘sun’ and dæg ‘day,’ the glosses display also one instance of the two words constituting a phrase, with word sun ‘sun’ functioning as an attribute to dæg ‘day’. That results in the translation of the Latin phrase die sabbati ‘day of Sabbath’ into ‘day of the sun’ rather than ‘Sunday;’ cf.:

(2)

Lat.: ...et intruit secundum consuetudinem suam die sabbati in synagogam...

OE: ...& cuomto nazareth þer was gefoed ðe ofer geuna his dæge sunnan in somnung...

ModE: ...and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. {Lk 4:16}

The next word glossing sabbat, with a number of occurrences equal to that of Sunday (17 occurrences), is symbledæg, a compound consisting of symble ‘feast’ and dæg ‘day’. Thus, contrary to Sunday, which names the day, symbledæg describes its character as the day devoted to religious feast:
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(3) Lat.: ...sabbatum est non licet tibi tollere grabatum tuum
OE: ...symbeLeod is ne is gelefed vel þe þet þu geniome vel beer þin.
ModE: “...It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat.” {Jn 5:10}

Similarly to the previous compound, also *symbeLeod* occurs as a phrase ‘day of the feast’. Yet, the phrase is yet again employed only as the equivalent of the phrase *die sabbati* ‘day of Sabbath’. Thus, is seems that the translator preferred two separate words in Old English whenever the original used two items, to preserve the emphatic structure; cf.:

(4) Lat.: Respondens autem archesynagogus indignans quia sabbato curasset iesus dicebat turbae sex dies sunt in quibus oportet operari in his ergo uenite et curamini et non in die sabbati
OE: ondsuaradepa baesfolcesaldormon wrappeforpon on symbeLeodagum gehælde se hælend cuoe þe þæm force vel þæm here sex dagas sint on þæm gerisep vel is gelefed to wyrcame vel þæt gie wyре on þæm forþon cymaþ & lecenepe & ne in daeg symbles.
ModE: Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue ruler said to the people, “There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.” {Lk 13:14}

The gloss also contains a synonym to *symbeLeod*, which is *haligdæg*, formed of ‘holy’ and ‘day’. The word is used once in the gospel by Mark, as an equivalent of the Latin plural form:

(5) Lat.: et obseruabant eum si sabbatis curaret ut accusarent illum
OE: & behealdon hine gif vel hueþer on haligdagum gegemde þætte hia geteldon vel njþria hine.
ModE: Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. {Mk 3:2}

In the whole text, there are only two instances of the word *haligdæg* (cf. Cook 1969: 110), which are listed as (5) above and (8b) below. It is thus impossible to suggest any reason for the choice of that word. Obviously, the translator preferred the form *symbeLeod* to *haligdæg*, although the two words convey a very similar meaning.

One more compound is used to gloss *sabbat*, mainly *ræstdæg*, consisting of ‘rest’ and ‘day’, which actually renders the original Hebrew meaning of the word *sabbat*, i.e. ‘to rest’. The item is employed in 4 instances, all of which are found in the gospel by Mark, as illustrated by (6):
It is interesting to note that the form ‘day of rest’ is used in the passage in which the Pharisees accuse Jesus and his disciples, among other things, of working on Sabbath. Thus, it seems plausible that the translator used the word *ræstdæg* to stress the contrast between work that was performed and the rest the day was devoted to. Still, other gospels do not employ the word *ræstdæg* even in very similar contexts, which seems to point at the passing preference of the translator.

Occasionally, the English text contains a more general term than the original one. There are several instances of *sabbat* glossed with *dæg* ‘day’ only. The word might be modified by appropriate adjectives, such as *forma* ‘first’ (7a) or *aefterra* ‘second’ (7b) for Latin *prima* and *secundo*, respectively, although it is also encountered on its own in (7c), when there is no adjective in the original text:

(7a)

Lat.: Uespere autem *sabbati* quae lucescit in *prima sabbati* uenit maria magdalene...
OE: cfem uutedlicebiu vel ða gelihtep in *forma dæg* cuom ðiù magdalenesca...
ModE: After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. {Mt 28:1}

(7b)

Lat.: Factum est autem in *sabbato secundo* cum transirent per sata...
OE: aworden wæs þonne on þone *aefterra dæg* miþþy oferforodon þerh geceecton...
ModE: One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grain-fields... {Lk 6:1}

(7c)

Lat.: Et discendit in capharnaum ciuitatem galileae ibique docebat illos *sabbatis*
OE: & dune astag in capharnaum ceastra galilie & þer lærde hia on *dagum*.
ModE: Then he went down to Capernaum, a town in Galilee, an on the Sabbath began to teach the people. {Lk 4:31}

The notion of the first and second Sabbath, Latin *prima sabbati* and *sabbato secundo*, seems to be quite problematic for the translator. As the data show, he simplified the text in (7a) putting ‘later, at the dawn of the first day’ instead of ‘on the morning of the Sabbath, when it began to grow light on the first Sabbath’. In the example (7b), he used the phrase ‘on the second day’ instead of ‘second Sabbath’. Hence, in both examples the English
equivalent of *sabbat* is the word *daeg*. Those two were special days marking first and second Sabbaths of the Passover. Apparently, the translator avoided the terms such as *Sunday* or *day of rest* in that context, since their usage could lead to the confusion between the ordinary Sabbaths and the Sabbaths of Passover.

### 4.2. One-to-many relation

Another frequently use method of glossing the *Lindisfarne Gospels* is the employment of numerous equivalents for a single Latin word. Such forms are provided either one above another or one following another, separated by a special symbol rendered by *vel*. They are encountered throughout the text, both for grammatical forms and lexical equivalents. As regards the word *sabbat*, it is glossed by more than one word in 3 instances. The variants include *feast or Sunday* (8a), *holy day or Sunday* (8b), and, surprisingly, *Sunday or Saturday* (8c); cf.:

(8a)

Lat.: …*ct in sabbato* circumcidentis hominem  
OE: …& in *symbol* vel *sunnedæg* ge ymbcearfas vel þone monnu.  
ModE: …you circumcise a child on the Sabbath. {Jn 7:22}

(8b)

Lat.: et facto *sabbato* coepit in synagoga docere…  
OE: & gewarb *haligdoeg* vel *sunnadoeg* ongann in somnung…  
ModE: When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue… {Mk 6:2}

(8c)

Lat.: *dominus est enim filius hominis etiam sabbati*  
OE: *dríhten is forponsunumonnesgéevel sorphlic to sunnade* vel to *seternes daeg*.  
ModE: For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” {Mt 12:8}

It is especially difficult to account for the presence of the form *seternes daeg* ‘Saturday,’ literally ‘day of Saturn,’ although it is the exact equivalent of *sabbat* as far as the names of days are concerned. Yet, since that day was not associated with religious events in Christian religion, it does not convey the meaning of the original text. Perhaps, the translator felt that in that context it is not necessary to emphasize the religious character of the day in question and rather focused on the literal translation. Interestingly, the use of two forms in that case might be understood as accentuation of the fact that man is the lord on any day, be it Saturday or Sunday.

Additionally, the glosses contain passages in which the translator used explanatory notes for the identification of the day; cf.:
As the data show, in both (9a) and (9b), the English text offers two translations. Here, however, they are not put as equal variants but, as the presence of the phrase *id est* suggests, the second is added as an explanation to the first one. Thus, it may reasonably be argued that the translator felt that one equivalent would not be specific enough and he used the phrases ‘the first day *id est* Sunday’ and ‘that day *id est* Sunday,’ respectively.

Incidentally, the passage in (9a) contains the expressions *first Sabbath* which, as was mentioned before, seems to cause considerable difficulty in translation. Contrary to the examples (7a–b), which employ the word *day*, in (9a) the explanatory phrase is added, *first day* i.e. *Sunday*. It is important to notice that both passages (9a) and (9b) refer to the day of resurrection of Jesus and thus the information that it was on Sunday seems to be crucial here. Interestingly, the original texts contain the word *sabbat*, which, if translated in any other way, would be against the Christian belief that the day of resurrection is Sunday. Actually, the Latin word *sabbat* stood not only for ‘Sabbath,’ but also underwent the process of synecdoche and was used in the meaning ‘week,’ and it might be employed in that meaning in (9). Hence, the translation ‘the first day of the week’ used in the majority, if not all, versions of the Bible.

The above-mentioned meaning of *sabbat* as ‘week’ is most obvious in the following passage:

(10)

Lat: *ieiuno bis in sabbato decimas do omnium quae possideo*  
OE: *ic faesto tuigo in wico teigbuncgas ic sello allra þape ic ah vel agnigo.*  
ModE: I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I possess’. {Lk 18:12}

As the quotation shows, the word *sabbato* is not treated here as a separate item to gloss but the translator attempts to provide the meaning of the whole phrase. Hence, although the literal meaning of the original is “I fast twice between Sabbaths”, the English gloss reads “I fast twice a week.” This is another confirmation of the idea that glossing of the *Lindisfarne Gospels* was not a mechanical activity but a conscious process of translation.
It is also interesting to note that in one instance the translator corrected his version actually changing the phrase *that day* into *sunday*, and then again into *Sunday*; cf.:

(11)

Lat: Una autem *sabbati* maria magdalene uenit mane cum athuc tenebrae essent ad monumentum…

OE: an uutedlice þara *dagana* vel (CORR) *synnadaga* (CORR) vel (CORR) *sunnadaga* maria þio magbalenisca cuom armorgen…

ModE: Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb… {Jn 20:1}

Whereas the second change seems to be a simple correction of a spelling mistake, the first one actually captures the moment of the translator’s indecision. Note that the example coming from gospel by John is almost identical with that of Mark quoted in (9b), which supports the idea that the translation of the passages about resurrection was quite challenging.

4.3. Loanword

Apart from using various methods to translate the word in question, in one of the gospels Ældred also uses transfer. There are three instances of the Latin item left in its original form in the English gloss, cf:

(12a)

Lat: …si licet *sabbatis* curare ut accussarent eum

OE: …gif is gelefed on *sabbatum* gume vel gelecnia þætte he gefraepgedon…

ModE: “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” {Mt 12:10}

(12b)

Lat: …et si ceciderit haec *sabbatis* in foueam…

OE: … & gif gefallas þius vel þa on *sabbatum* in seaþ…

ModE: …and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath… {Mt 12:11}

(12c)

Lat: …itaque licet *sabbatis* bene facere

OE: …forþon is gelefed in *sabbatum* wel doa.

ModE: Therefore, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” {Mt 12:12}

Note that in all three instances quoted above, the Latin word appears with the Old English ending of dative plural. Thus, it is not an adoption of a foreign item but rather an adaptation, which implies that the English were already acquainted with that word. Still, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the *Lindisfarne Gospels* is the first source in English that displays that item. Hence, either the word was familiar to English speakers but not used in
writing before, or it was familiar only to the translator, who was proficient in Latin. Curiously, the gospel by Matthew is the only one from the collection to employ the Latin word without any translation. Additionally, all three instances occur in three consecutive sentences, which yet again points to a passing preference of the translator.

4.4. One-to-none relation

Finally, it needs to be mentioned that the Latin word is occasionally left without any English equivalent. The glosses contain two such instances, cf.:

(13a)
Lat:    Orate autem ut non fiat fuga uestra hieme uel sabbato
OE:     biddas uutedlice þæt ne sie fleam iwer vel.
ModE:   Pray that your flight will not take place in winter, or on the Sabbath. {Mt 24:20}

(13b)
Lat:    Et ingrediuntur capharnaum et statim sabbatis ingressus synagogam docebat eos
OE:     & infoerden capharnaum þa burug & sona ineode vel foerde to somnung lærede hia.
ModE:   They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. {Mk 1:21}

Whereas the presence of vel in (13a) might suggest that the reader was referred to the original text to find the form *sabbato* and construe the meaning himself, the passage in (13b) simply omits the information that the event took place on Sabbath. That might be accounted for in two ways. It could be an unconscious omission or, perhaps, due to the addition of the phrase *þa burug* ‘the city’ to explain the proper name *capharnaum*, the translator simply lacked the space to gloss all the remaining words.

5. The comparison of gospels

The analysis of the Old English equivalents of Latin *sabbat* reveals that the vocabulary of the four gospels is not uniform. For each of the texts one preferred variant can be identified, which is employed more frequently than other words for the Latin word. The gospel by Luke, for instance, contains the highest occurrence of the word *symbledæg*, which glosses *sabbat* in 13 out of 20 instances used in the gospel. In the gospel by John the word *sunnandaeg* translates 7 out of 12 occurrences of *sabbat*. Furthermore, certain equivalents are unique to one gospel, e.g. the gospel by Matthew is the only one containing the transfer of the original item.
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The differences in the choice of words are best seen on comparing similar, or even identical, passages from various gospels, such as those quoted in (14):

(14a)
Lat: ...interrogo uos si licet sabbato bene facere an male...
OE: ...ic fraegnoiuih gif is alefed on symbledæg wel doa vel oþpe yfle...
ModE: ..."I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil..." {Lk 6:9}

(14b)
Lat: et dicit eis licet sabbatis bene facere an male...
OE: & cueb to him is alefed hraestdagum wel wyrce vel yfle...
ModE: Then Jesus asked them, "which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil... {Mk 3:4}

(14c)
Lat: ...dicent es licet sabbatis curare ut accussarent eum
OE: ...cuoedegif is gelefedon sabbatum gernevel gelecniabette he gefraepgedon vel geteldon hin.
ModE: ...they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" {Mt 12:10}

As the data show, the three gospels contain a different word for the same Latin item. Thus, it follows that the translator presumably did not base the text of gospels on the previously glossed ones but, seemingly, each time searched for English equivalents. Once selected, they were employed with certain consistency throughout the whole gospel, or at least the neighbouring passages, since the phrases occurring close to one another often contain the same English word.

6. Concluding remarks

The search for the Old English words used to gloss the Latin word sabbat in the Lindisfarne Gospels reveals several different single items, which are used with various frequency in the text; cf.:

(15)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Occurrences</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sunnandæg</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>symbledæg</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ræstæg</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>daeg</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>haligdaeg</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The words listed are often employed interchangeably, some of them being preferred in certain gospels. The two most frequently employed items, Sunday and day of feast, underlie the religious connotations of sabbat, which was the day of feast falling on Sunday in Christianity.
Apart from single words, the translator uses also other methods of rendering the meaning of *sabbat*. Those include the employment of several variants (5 instances), explanations (2 instances) or modulation, i.e. translation of the meaning rather than word-for-word rendering (1 instance). In a few instances, he also transfers the word from Latin (3 instances) or, actually, omits it in the English text (3 instances).

The analysis clearly shows that Ælred’s glossing did not only involve the addition of a native equivalent in-between the lines. First of all, he obviously pays attention to the meaning of the text attempting to convey it in his version employing words comprehensive to the reader and carrying similar associations as the original item. Second, he adds variants or explanations whenever the use of one item seems to be insufficient. Last but not least, he does not base the translation of gospels on the previously done ones, since each text contains different wording.

**References**

**Primary sources**


**Secondary sources**


