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in
Middle English Literature

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Some Aspects of Medieval Number Symbolism in Langland's *Piers Plowman*, A-Text

by

Linda L. Lattin*

Believing himself an infinitesimal part of the universe and his destiny closely aligned with the movement of the stars, primitive man formulated a concept of *one* as himself, and of *another* as that which was *not himself*, views antedating his abstractions of *oneness* and *twoness*.¹ There is nothing conclusive, however, about the origin of number nomenclature, nor is there positive agreement among scholars as to how and when primitive man first conceived of the reality of numbers. Perhaps, he saw himself as one, ". . . the wings of a bird [as] two, clover-leaves three, the legs of an animal four, the fingers on his own hand five."² Generally, he is thought to have discovered his fingers to be a convenient base for counting. Indeed, since all Indo-European languages (as well as Semitic and Mongolian) have *ten* as a counting base, scholars have assumed that man's original terms for the fingers may have suggested those for numbers.³ These words, of course, antedate recorded history, and abstract notions of number as an entity were later revelations.⁴

By the time of the Middle Ages, nevertheless, man had come to accept number as a universal aid in such matters as agronomy, astrology, astronomy, commerce, and early forms of engineering.⁵ In this respect, however, he was not so much interested in number for its own sake as for what it achieved for him in his daily routine. Convinced, by this time, of the presence of a stable force in a perpetually changing universe,⁶ he seized upon the following statement in the Apocrypha (*Book of Wisdom*), "Thou hast ordered all things in measure, in number, and in weight," believing that it stressed the importance of *number* in the plan of creation.⁷ Thus, in a way, he reassured himself of cosmic order.⁸ In addition, Biblical numbers, especially those in the New Testament and

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¹D. E. Smith, *History of Mathematics*, I, 17-18; Tobias Dantzig, *Number, the Language of Science*, p. 6; Cyril C. Richardson, "The Foundations of Christian Symbolism," in *Religious Symbolism*, p. 2.

²Dantzig, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

³*Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁵E. T. Bell, *The Magic of Numbers*, p. 11.

⁶H. F. Dunbar, *Symbolism in Medieval Thought and Its Consummation in The Divine Comedy* p. 197.

⁷R. W. Rauch, "Langland and Medieval Functionalism," *Review of Politics*, X (October, 1943), 442.

⁸Vincent F. Hopper, "Medieval Number Symbolism," in *An Encyclopedia of Religion*, p. 755.

Apocalypse, had been a means of preserving an older idiom,⁹ the principles of which had probably originated with the Pythagoreans, who had believed that a Great Architect, upon the basis of number, had shaped the universe.¹⁰ Furthermore, the Jews had, for a long time, been attracted to the mystical properties of numbers, so that many of their ancient concepts had gradually infiltrated Biblical story.¹¹ Consequently, when the medieval theologian became preoccupied with form and number, his theories tended to strengthen these ancient views on cosmic order.¹² Concluding that all created things were computable, he believed the nine orders of angels to be spiritual, and all other things, living, dead, or inert, to be corporeal.¹³

Medieval symbolism also partook of the supernatural, showing special interest for the mysterious and unaccountable.¹⁴ Attempting to explicate difficult mystical passages in Scripture, priests often devised elaborate numerical interpretations of Biblical idiom.¹⁵ Since the laity could neither read nor write, the clergy gradually increased their use of religious symbols as teaching devices with which to disseminate the history and doctrine deemed warranted by Church officials.¹⁶ In time, medieval symbolism promoted an understanding of basic religious tenets, both artist and poet agreeing that ". . . the mortal and tangible were but elements through which the poem or story, or the carved or painted picture, was made the realizing symbol of the unseen and eternal Spirit."¹⁷ It was a most effective symbolism, when natural and simple.¹⁸ As a means of imparting spiritual truths, it permeated the liturgy of the Mass, religious art, and the religious lyric. History reveals, therefore, that from the beginnings of the Christian era throughout the medieval period, the mystical and sacred properties of certain numbers were emphasized.¹⁹ *One* was associated with *God*, *five* with the five wounds of Christ, *twelve* with the Twelve Tribes of Israel or the Apostles, *forty* with the days of the flood, the Israelites in the desert, or Christ's period in the wilderness. In the main, odd numbers reflected the celestial and divine; even numbers, the mundane.²⁰ Thus, ancient concepts supplied ". . .

⁹Vincent F. Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism*, p. 71.

¹⁰Dantzig, *op. cit.*, p. 99; E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, p. 18; F. Cajori, *A History of Mathematics*, p. 55; Oscar Goldberg, "On Numbers in the Bible," *Scripta Mathematica*, XII (September, 1946), 231.

¹¹Dantzig, *op. cit.*, p. 24; Herbert Thurston, "The Use of Numbers in the Church," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, XI, 151.

¹²C. A. Patrides, "Numerological Approach to Cosmic Order during the English Renaissance," *Isis*, XLI (December, 1958), 394.

¹³Rauch, *op. cit.*, p. 443; Christopher Dawson, *Medieval Religion*, p. 175.

¹⁴Sidney Heath, *The Romance of Symbolism and its Relationship to Church Ornaments and Architecture*, p. 3.

¹⁵Vincent F. Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism*, p. 114.

¹⁶Heath, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-11.

¹⁷H. O. Taylor, *The Medieval Mind*, II, 112.

¹⁸Herbert Thurston, "Religious Symbolism," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, XIV, 373; Gordon Leff, *Medieval Thought*, p. 35.

¹⁹Thurston, "The Use of Numbers in the Church," p. 151; also, Aronold Whittick, *Symbols, Signs, and Their Meaning*, p. 224.

²⁰Vincent F. Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism*, p. 101; also, Leo Stalnaker, *Mystic Symbolism in Bible Numbers*, p. 19.

the only garments in which the ideas of the new religion could clothe themselves."²¹ In this manner, number came to influence all aspects of medieval thought, ". . . because the internal universe is on a definite and co-ordinated plan in which quantitative relations are repeated correspondentially through different states and planes. Number is common to all planes and thus unites them."²² Consequently, a philosophy of numbers, related to specific Christian principles and not to the question of the true meaning of number itself, became firmly established in medieval literature.²³ It is one that often eludes the modern reader trained to recognize the more conventional types of literary symbol.²⁴

In general, the numbers invested with symbolic meaning by medieval theologians were *one, two, three, four, six, seven, ten, twelve, forty, and seventy.*²⁵ *Five, eight, and nine*, seldom occurring in Scripture, were later accorded significance, so that eventually all of the numbers of the decad became symbolic, as well as *twelve, forty, and seventy.* *One* suggested the center of all things;²⁶ "uniqueness, self-sufficiency, indivisibility,"²⁷ or the unity of God and the Spirit.²⁸ *Two* symbolized ". . . the inevitable duality of being on the planes of manifestation;"²⁹ union;³⁰ diversity of Earth and Matter;³¹ or *one* in *two* in spirit and matter.³² *Three* was suggestive of completeness of state;³³ the Deity³⁴ or Trinity;³⁵ individual completion and action; or man himself as body, soul, and spirit.³⁶ *Four* signified the spiritual world;³⁷ nature; man by nature; or system and order.³⁸ *Five* implied incompleteness³⁹ or the flesh.⁴⁰ *Six* symbolized earthly perfection in the sense of God's having created the world in six days.⁴¹ *Seven*, representing the union of Spirit

²¹Heath, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

²²G. A. Gaskell (ed.), *Dictionary of All Scriptures and Myths*, p. 541.

²³Vincent F. Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism*, p. 135.

²⁴F. Edward Hulme, *The History, Principles and Practice of Symbolism in Christian Art*, p. 10.

²⁵Stalnaker, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

²⁶Gaskell, *op. cit.*, p. 541.

²⁷W. H. Bennett, "Number," *Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 659.

²⁸Vincent F. Hopper, "Number Symbolism," p. 755.

²⁹Gaskell, *op. cit.*, p. 541.

³⁰Bennett, *op. cit.*, p. 659.

³¹Vincent F. Hopper, "Medieval Number Symbolism," p. 755.

³²Gaskell, *op. cit.*, p. 773.

³³*Ibid.*, pp. 541-542.

³⁴Bennett, *op. cit.*, p. 659.

³⁵Vincent F. Hopper, "Medieval Number Symbolism," p. 755.

³⁶Gaskell, *op. cit.*, p. 756.

³⁷Bennett, *op. cit.*, p. 659; also, Emil Kautzsch, "Sacred Numbers," *Religious Encyclopedia*, VIII, 204.

³⁸Gaskell, *op. cit.*, p. 291.

³⁹Bennett, *op. cit.*, p. 659.

⁴⁰Vincent F. Hopper, "Medieval Number Symbolism," p. 755; also, Richard H. Greene, "Cawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection," *Journal of English Literary History*, XXIX (June, 1962), 121-139.

⁴¹Vincent F. Hopper, "Medieval Number Symbolism," p. 755; also, Thurston, *op. cit.*, XIV, 376; Greene, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

and Matter in the world,⁴² was also the perfect number, from which have come the seven wonders of the world, seven wise men, seven ages of man, and seven gifts of the Holy Spirit.⁴³ Eight was a symbol of regeneration⁴⁴ or of immortality;⁴⁵ *i. e.*, God created the world in six days, rested on the seventh, and decreed the eighth to be the eternity which followed.⁴⁶ *Nine* was also a perfect number,⁴⁷ being an extension of the Trinity.⁴⁸ *Ten* symbolized perfection or completion; *i. e.*, *seven* (all created things) plus *three* (Trinity of the Creator) equals *ten* (perfection).⁴⁹ *Eleven*, on the other hand, represented that which is incomplete.⁵⁰ *Twelve* corresponded to the "soul-states" (the Twelve Tribes of Israel); the "soul-qualities" (the Twelve Apostles);⁵¹ or the Children of God.⁵² *Forty* symbolized trial, humiliation, or desolation. *Seventy* was the number of transition.⁵³ For convenience, one may state this information as follows:

<i>One</i>	uniqueness; self-sufficiency; indivisibility; God
<i>Two</i>	diversity of spirit and matter; union; combination
<i>Three</i>	completion; the Trinity
<i>Four</i>	physical world; spiritual state of the Creation of the Trinity
<i>Five</i>	incompletion; imperfection; secular state of the world; worldliness
<i>Six</i>	earthly perfection
<i>Seven</i>	perfection; union of spirit and matter in the creation of the world
<i>Eight</i>	regeneration; immortality
<i>Nine</i>	extension of three, <i>i. e.</i> , perfect completion
<i>Ten</i>	perfection, completion
<i>Eleven</i>	transgression; outside of measure
<i>Twelve</i>	Children of God
<i>Forty</i>	trial; humiliation; desolation
<i>Seventy</i>	transition

Combinations of Numbers

three x four = world and man in intimate union with God
four + eight = world and man renewed through God

In *Piers Plowman*, number symbolism occurs within the major framework of the twelve passus constituting the poem, the number of a passus often suggesting the subject treated therein. For example, in

⁴²Vincent F. Hopper, "Medieval Number Symbolism," p. 755; and Grace Murray Hopper, "The Ungenerated Seven as an Index to Pythagorean Number Theory," *American Mathematical Monthly*, XLIII (August-September, 1936), 409-413.

⁴³Whittick, *op. cit.*, p. 225; Hulme, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

⁴⁴Whittick, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

⁴⁵Vincent F. Hopper, "Medieval Number Symbolism," p. 755.

⁴⁶Gaskell, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 537.

⁴⁸Vincent F. Hopper, "Medieval Number Symbolism," p. 755.

⁴⁹Gaskell, *op. cit.*, p. 749; Stalnaker, *op. cit.*, p. 17; Bennett, *op. cit.*, p. 659.

⁵⁰Gaskell, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, p. 773; Stalnaker, *op. cit.*, p. 17; also, "Symbolical and Sacred Numbers in the Scriptures," *Methodist Review*, CX (November, 1927), 975.

⁵²Bennett, *op. cit.*, p. 659; Thurston, *op. cit.*, XIV, 376.

⁵³Stalnaker, *op. cit.* p. 18.

Passus I, concerning Truth as God, Langland asserts that the *one* best way for man to live is by adhering to Truth (God). In *Passus II*, he reveals that Meed and Falsehood, the physical and spiritual evils antagonistic to the world, have planned to marry in order to oppose Truth: "Such weddyng to werche to wrapþe wiþ treuþe."⁵⁴ In *Passus III*, he considers the necessity of the presence of the Trinity in the world, prophesying that ". . . kynde wyt [Holy Ghost] shal come zet, & conscience [God the Creator] togidre, / And make of lawe a labourer, such loue [Christ] shal arise." (III.275-276) In *Passus IV*, he attempts to understand the kind of justice that would result from the proposed marriage of Conscience and Lady Meed. In *Passus V*, he is concerned with the imperfections of humanity. In *Passus VI*, through Piers, he describes the highway to Truth, implying that man's achievement of a state of earthly perfection is requisite to his attainment to heavenly bliss (Truth). In *Passus VII*, in the plowing of the half-acre, he epitomizes the life proper to all Christians and delineates man's cycle (*seven*) in terms of religious doctrine. In *Passus VIII*, he describes the reading of the Pardon bringing salvation (immortality) to mankind. In the remaining four *passus*, and in all twelve for that matter, it is clear that his poem concerns the Children of God, the fair field full of folk.

The twelve *passus* are also divided into two parts: one of eight *passus* related to man's physical acts; and one of four *passus* concerned with man's thinking life (*i.e.*, spiritual). In the broadest sense, then, *two* emerges as Langland's symbol for matter and spirit. At the same time, he utilizes the concept of *three* associated with the Trinity, further dividing each of the two main sections of his poem into thirds: one treating philosophical, ethical, and spiritual matters; the other comprising a reiteration of these subjects, a discussion of the mysteries of faith, and a treatise upon the Church as a corporate body. He also emphasizes three ways of life (the physical, the spiritual, and a desirable combination of these two) in Do-well, Do-bet, and Do-best. Furthermore, he assigns to Piers three main episodes in the narrative: the pilgrimage to Truth, the reading of the Pardon, and the passage on Hunger. That he divides each of the twelve *passus* into thirds may also be significant. At least, it is possible for one to state the general theme of the poem in terms of the following formulae: (a) four *passus* (all creation) added to eight *passus* (immortality, rebirth) produce twelve *passus* (the world and man renewed by a quest for Truth); or (b) four *passus* (all creation) *multiplied* by the three "thirds" of the poem (Trinity) equal twelve *passus* (the world and man in union with God).

The presence of medieval number symbolism in the poem also contributes significantly to the allegorical meaning in numerous specific instances. For example, *seven* (perfection), the number most frequently employed, occurs fourteen times. *Two* (union) appears eleven times.

⁵⁴William Langland, *Piers Plowman: The A. Version*, edited by George Kane, II.81. All references to the poem are from this edition. See also David C. Fowler, *Piers the Plowman: Literary Relations of the A and B Texts*, pp. 3-18.

Three (Divinity, completion) and *five* (worldliness, imperfection) occur six times each. *One hundred* (eternal completion) is employed five times. *Four* (the world), ten (completion), and *eleven* (transgression outside of measure) appear four times each. *One* (power, self-sufficiency, occurs three times. *Six* (earthly perfection), *twelve* (Children of God), and *forty* (trial, desolation, humiliation) occur twice each. *Eight* (immortality), *thirteen* (evil), *fifteen* (complete worldliness), and *ten thousand* (all humanity, all creation) are employed once each. The following examination of the use of certain numbers in *Piers Plowman* (A-Text) is representative of Langland's approach to medieval number symbolism:

"I fond þere Freris, alle þe foure ordris . . ." (*Pro.55*) This is Langland's first reference to number in the work. Since *four* is the sum of the Trinity and the Creative Force, he may have meant for it to reflect, here, the spiritual state of the world. If so, it embodies not only the four orders of friars (Friars Minor), but their worldliness, as well. Because he is later concerned with the degeneration of these spiritual institutions and is moved to criticize priests who seek worldly benefits, *four* (physical world) may have signified for him the full scope of this lively medieval argument (*cf.*, VIII.176).

"Pere houide an hundrit in houuis of silk . . ." (*Pro.84*) London priests who "sang for simony" were subject to Langland's attack. *Hundred*, the number of absolute completion and the numerical embodiment of eternal completion, illustrates the clergy's extensive abandonment of spiritual life.

"Al þis I sauȝ slepying & seue siþes more." (*Pro.109*) The Dreamer utters this statement, having observed that the populace, as well as the clergy, had forsaken the teachings of the Church. *Seven*, the sum of the first "real" numbers and, thus, symbolic of all numbers, signifies "perfect completion," either in a sacred or profane sense. Consequently, the dream has been complete in its thorough exposure of the evils in the world.

". . . [Trewe] fourmide ȝow alle / Boþe wiþ fel & wiþ face, & ȝaf fyue wyttes / For to worshiþe hym þerewiþ whiles ȝe ben here." (I.14-16) Thus, Holy Church describes the actions of Truth, dwelling in the Tower. *Five* refers to the flesh or man's imperfections; hence, Holy Church is telling the Dreamer that God (Truth) has created him in the flesh so that he may overtly worship Him.

". . . [Trewe] comaundite of his curteisie in commoun þre þinges . . ." (I.20) Since *three* symbolizes the Deity, all actions attributable to *three* are perfect, complete, and holy. Thus, matters which Truth commands are three, encompassing the whole of man's spiritual existence, relating to God, and sharing in perfection, completion, and holiness.

"And nouȝt to fasten a friday in fyue score wynter . . ." (I.99) *Fyue score* rather than *one hundred* is dictated by the metre and alliterative pattern, for *one hundred* would be conveyed a more profound meaning. In *fyue score*, nevertheless, it is still possible to comprehend

a state of absolute completion. Thus, the probable reading, here: "And never only to fast one Friday in a lifetime (completion)."

"Alle here fyue fyngris were frettid wiþ rynges . . ." (II.11) In reference to Lady Meed, *five* (the secular, the flesh, and imperfection) suits her worldliness, subsequently verified in Langland's careful description of her elaborate costume.

"Alle þe riche retenaunce þat regniþ wiþ false / Were beden to þe b[ri]dale on boþe two sides." (II.34) As an even number, *two* is weak, because it can be divided. At the same time, it can represent antagonism toward the world. Here, the retinue is divided into *two* equal groups, symbolic of weakness. However, should these two groups eventually unite, immediately they will become antagonistic to the world, their leader being False.

"And ten þousand tentis teldit beside . . ." (II.42) *Ten* (completion) is manifest four times in this sum (*i.e.*, 10 x 10 x 10 x 10). Since *four* stands for the physical world, *ten thousand*, the people present at the wedding of Lady Meed and False, represents all humanity, all creation.

"And wiþheld him half [a] ȝer & elleuene dayes." (II.190) Although not an associational number, *eleven* was, nevertheless, employed by Hugo of St. Victor to connote transgression outside of measure. Consequently, it is most fitting that False's period of confinement be governed, in part, by *eleven*.

"And peiȝ falshed hadde folewid þe þis fiftene wynter . . ." (III.38) Not symbolic in itself, *fifteen* is, however, the sum of *ten* and *five*, or the product of *five* times *three*—in either sense, suggesting complete worldliness; thus, False, a product of the world, is likely to plague man throughout life.

"She may neiȝ as muche do in a moneþ ones / As ȝoure secre sel in seue score dayes." (III.134-135) *Seven* symbolizes the perfection of the universe in spirit (*three*) and matter (*four*). Thus, *one* is used in an ironic sense, here: Lady Meed can accomplish as much evil in one month (by means of her purse) as the sacred seal (king's seal) achieves in a half year of doing good deeds.

"Þou hast longid on myn half enleuene tymes . . ." (III.168) Lady Meed reproves Conscience for taking liberty (in the way of extending charity) with her treasure. *Eleven* implies that, by Lady Meed's standards, the charity of Conscience lies outside of measure—that it is a sin without measure.

"And o cristene king kepe vs ichone." (III.265) *One* refers to the unity and strength needed in the world to combat the antagonism created by Lady Meed.

"And takiþ me but a taile for ten quarteris otis . . ." (IV.45) *Ten* (earthly and spiritual completion) symbolizes the wholesale destruction of the possessions of Peace at the hands of Wrong.

"He sh[al] not þis seue ȝer se hise feet ones!" (IV.73) Wrong is to be cast into irons for his misdeeds, and *seven* (perfection) illustrates the nature of his incarceration (*cf.*, V.56).

"In a torn tabbard of twelue wynter age" (V.111) *Twelve* refers to the Children of God and suggests the penetration of matter with spirit. It may also be associated, here, with the colors of Jacob's coat, with the Tribes of Israel, the age of Christ when He accompanied His parents to Jerusalem, or with the Twelve Apostles. Referring as it does, here, to a torn garment, however, it probably discloses the degree of penetration achieved by the Spirit of God, perhaps more clearly evident when Covetousness later states, "Ferst I lernide to leize a lef oþer tweize" (V.117) When next he reveals that during "þise seue zer" (V.122) he could not have sold his wares without the grace of Guile, he is confessing in his use of *seven* (perfection) that *never* would he have become a successful salesman without Guile's assistance. He admits, also, that he has cheated others by measuring his goods "Til ten zardis oþer twelue tollide out þrittene." (V.128) *Thirteen*, associated with betrayal (Judas), lies outside the scope of *twelve* and represents, therefore, complete evil.

"Sheo haþ yholde huxterie elleuene wynter." (V.141) Envy, alluding to his cheating wife, measures the seriousness of her crimes in terms of *eleven*, implying that, because she has been a huckster, she has placed herself beyond the reaches of benevolence; that she has denied herself the Grace of God.

"Shal no sonneday be þis seue zer, but seknesse it make, / Ðat I ne shal do me er day to þe dere chirche / And here masse & matynes" (V.222-224) Sloth vows to reform. Using *seven* (perfection), he pledges that, unless he be ill, he will attend Church every Sunday in the perfection of time.

"I haue ben his folewere al þis fourty wynter" (V.30) so says Piers of Truth. *Forty*, an associational number, stands for man's trial, humiliation, and desolation. It is also possibly connected, in a three-fold sense, with the days of Christ in the wilderness, the Israelites in the desert, and with the days of the flood. Hence, the trial for Piers is his long quest for Truth.

"Happily an hundrit wynter er þou eft entre." (VI.101) *Hundred* is *ten* times *ten*. Since *ten* is the number of completion, *ten* times *ten* suggests *absolute* completion; *i.e.*, one who willingly denies himself the companionship of God must endure the completion of time before he may have a second opportunity to enter into God's grace.

"For þou shalt zelde it azen at one zeris ende" (VII.42) *One* (unique, self-sufficient, indivisible) implies that the time span alluded to, here, is that which tests the individual to his capacity.

"Þise sixe ben yset to saue the castel" (X.22) *Six*, like *three*, is associated with the Deity, but in an extended sense (power, majesty, wisdom, love, mercy, justice).⁵⁵ As a perfect number, it implies, here, that the castle will be saved. It is also used, later, to suggest another state of earthly perfection: "He haþ weddit a wif wiþinne þise woukes sixe" (XI.106)

"Outtake þe eigte soulis, & of iche beste a couple" (X.175)
Since Christ arose on the eighth day, *eight* by association signifies regeneration, immortality. Here, the eight souls alluded to in Langland's account of Noah and the flood are to enter upon a new way of life; to experience new states of existence.

"I am massager of deþ; men haue I tweyne" (XII.83)
Since *two* is symbolic of spirit and matter, the two men accompanying death's messenger are probably those who are to consume man's body and soul, especially inasmuch as they are later described as "trewe drinkeres boþe." (XII.85) United in this mission, they would also be antagonistic to the world; hence, to man.

Although it is possible for one to derive an entirely satisfactory understanding of medieval literature without a knowledge of number symbolism, his appreciation of the material will be vastly enriched by his comprehension of the variety of meanings inherent in the numbers employed in this literature. At the start, he should realize that these symbols were readily comprehended by medievalists and that the presence of number in a medieval work, more likely than not, suggests a host of meanings.

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