Poetry's lyre rings false on the superficial shell of a poem, but on the inside it speaks of a hidden and profound meaning to those who listen. Those who read with penetration, who refuse the outer layer of falsehood, find the sweet center of truth secreted within.


In 1868 a painted fragment of wall plaster was taken from the dirt of a Roman villa under excavation near Victoria Road, county Gloucester, of south-central England. Its removal was attended by a Captain Pbbott, then curator of the Cirencester Museum nearby. Scratched into the ochre surface of the unearthed plaster was the following palindrome, arranged in the form of a ROTAS magic square. This square, not much larger than the palm of a man's hand, shortly realized an unusual amount of attention. Formidable and varied apparatus critica with which to take its true measurements were applied by interested archaeologists and scholars of antiquity, but the square has resisted translation and much remains obscure of its history, origin and significance. In the German lowlands it had been known as a charm against toothache and the bite of mad dogs, the Portuguese had introduced it into Brazil where the Indians used it to protect against snakebite, and there were reports of its use in the area that is now Yugoslavia (Jerphanion, 1935). However, on the unlikely service of the magic square as the lone collator of such distinct geographies and cultures, expert opinion has remained for the most part timid and withdrawn.

In 1874 an article signed by C. Wescher called attention to a Greek manuscript dating from the end of the fourteenth century which bore the magic square in an inverted form, beginning with sator, and provided an interpretation alongside in ancient Greek. Wescher was convinced by the nature of his find that the square itself should be attributed to the spirited wordplay of certain Byzantine scholars and their tradition, which were known to relish and delight in cryptic symbolism. The Greek words which the manuscript bore to the side of the square appear unto this day as the oldest extant translation of the palindrome, and Wescher boldly offers a further translation of his own based on a rendering of the Latin and Greek entries: The sower is at the plow, and the work (of his tilling) turns the wheels (Le semeure est à la charrue, le travail (du labour))
Thus given over to a current tongue, the magic of the square seems largely dispelled. On Wescher’s recommendation its form can be seen as a curious epigraph, but no more so than other epigraphs of strange meanings and allusions. And the significance of its palindromic format can best be understood as the device of a parlor game, an enigma which comes down to us intact from the Middle Ages.

Nevertheless, certain observations should be made concerning whether or not Wescher had judiciously translated the magic square. The grammatical sense of the Latin is intact in his translation: what had been lost is merely the symmetrical arrangement of words and letters to which Wescher attributed no functional role in the square’s intended meaning, as can be seen from his French rendition. And if it is the grammatical significance and that alone which is to be translated from one line or verse into another, then Wescher was right to ignore the internal structure of the magic square in his translation. But, to assume that form has no bearing on meaning is a risky business in philology as it is in linguistics and literature -- not to mention psychology -- and to deny the connection between the two is to argue against the powers of language to articulate the deep moods and tremors of sensitivity in the human psyche. For certainly the formations of our expressions carry their own hidden symbolism and the messages transmitted by these symbols are then, in turn, anchored directly to meanings from the deepest layers of our thinking. Hence, any theory that aims to encompass the meanings imbedded in our language must also comprehend the deep implications of its second, active presence, its form.

Thus structure is an important consideration in any translation, but in the case of the palindrome it lurks within the language as an overbearing presence. The palindrome verse form bears its particular restrictions as do other poetic forms, such as the sonnet, the Alexandrine, and the riddle. However, the restriction which the palindrome bears is of a different design than considerations of meter, stress, and stanzaic division. The palindrome is restricted to a grammatical articulation of symmetry arranged about a vertical axis, and in the case of the rotas square this symmetry is expressed thus: Rotas opera tenet arepo sator.

The verse is arranged symmetrically about the letter n, which serves as an axis, and in the case of the rotas magic square this symmetry is compounded horizontally as well, for the square yields a symmetrical reading regardless of which corner is chosen as a point of departure. The formal restrictions on the language of the palindrome, then, make for a verse which returns upon itself and brings the eye to the center -- perhaps something can be made of this. However, any assessment of the original significance of the form and its functional role in the creation of the rotas square would require firm evidence from a shadowy and uncontroverted past, almost too much to ask.

Nevertheless, Wescher’s conclusions remained at the head of the critical discussion until nearly a quarter of a century later. In 1899 the Archaeological Journal issued an article by F. Haverfield which argued from archaeological evidence for the much earlier, Roman origin of the rotas square. The plaster of the Cirencester specimen resembled that of the Roman certain Latium. This same Latin inscription protruded from a large stone which appears to have been an areppenian. However, Gaulish arepenni have shown themselves to have been known in Gaul, 1953-65: Southern 1.
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concerning whether. The current: what had signs and letters where's intended translation, but
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of the Roman period, the letters of the inscription and the words were
certainly Latin, hence the square itself should likewise be understood in
this same Roman context. For Haverfield, only one stumbling block
protruded from this theory: the derivation of the word arepo, which ap-
pears to have roots in an ancient Gaulish term for a measure of ground,
arepennis. Haverfield points out that the philological distance from the
Gaulish arepennis to the Latin arare, to plow, is slight. Other writers
have shown that, in fact, rude plows equipped with wheels were commonly
known in Gaulish France, and were called by such a name (Carcopi-
no, 1953-65; Jerphanion, 1935).

Southern France provides further evidence for its influence in the
creation of the rotas square. Another specimen of it, beginning with
sator, is mentioned by Haverfield to have been engraved upon a slab of
terracotta over the door of the choir in the chapel of St. Laurent, near
Rochemaure in the Rhone valley. Other parallels he also considers
Roman in origin, taken from the "later empire". These are described as
the "palindromes" which occur on late pavements and in late poems".

So then, one would think it is not only the magic square itself that is
so striking. The diverse and glowing proliferation of magic squares
which are, oddly enough, more often than not discovered in conjunction
with church properties, would now seem to affirm a tradition and a model
by which serves the palindromic form is represented within each par-
ticular instance. Yet what is lacking is a means of getting at the intended significance
of the palindromes and magic squares. That this symmetry is a matter of intention by the creators of
palindromes and magic squares is beyond dispute, for it is far too rare
a quality to have occurred by chance and in such variety. And that thi
symmetry was intended to signify something other than puerile wordplay
must be demonstrated, for theorizing about the intended significance
and fundamental experience of linguistic forms would tend to show more
about what can be made of them in retrospect than what was intended by
them in history.

The scholars of antiquity are as a whole a cautious lot, and the German members of this group may have been the most wary, or, at least, this has been so in their treatment of the magic square. In 1899, the same year as the publication of the Haverfield article, a book appeared in Germany that cited a Coptic papyrus bearing the magic square in its rotas form. Subsequent opinion of the German illuminati held that this example was the most ancient specimen of the square yet discovered, although there was a reluctance by most German critics to date the papyrus upon which it occurred prior to the fourth or fifth century A.D. Franz Dornseiff, for one, judges the square from the Berlin papyrus to be a charm from the Middle Ages, and he lists the places of its widespread occurrence (Dornseiff, 1925; Erman and Krebs, 1899). This dating of the origin of the square would all but rule out any Roman hand in its creation, for by the middle of the fourth century the barbarization of the Roman Empire had already occurred, and what was left of a truly Roman culture in Coptic Egypt spoke Greek, not Latin. Perhaps the German scholars were not aware of the Cirencester find, for there is no mention of it, or maybe they would simply prefer to reserve their opinion on the antiquity of the rotas square and the impenetrable history which it must have, to them, represented.

Nevertheless, scholarship will never profit by turning away from the possibilities generated by propositions that do not fit comfortably into current trends and beliefs. The scholastic neglect met by the possibility of the rotas square's antiquity testifies only to the lack of that period's ability to process symbolic materials. The genuine reluctance of the German experts to allow a classical origin of the rotas square and its strange symbolism appears to have been motivated by a common desire to limit the scope of such wordplay to a medieval past-time, where its referents may be considered pointless and without content. Otherwise, modern language theory would be obliged to undergo transformations that would allow for the inclusion of the improbable messages carried by the word squares scattered about the Mediterranean during the classical period. Such an obligation would require a theoretical ability to know the meanings hidden between words and beneath a grammatical surface. This would ultimately lead scholarship to consider that the enduring significance of language is not outside of the thought, but within it -- not in what the words say, but in what is said between them.

But in 1926 a different note was sounded. Felix Grösser, who also seemed unaware of the Cirencester find, presented a hypothesis in direct disagreement with the reserved datings of the square by other German experts. Also, he forwarded a prediction of its later discovery in definitely Roman surroundings (Grösser, 1926). The Grösser hypothesis recognized the rotas square as more than a simple magic square: it was also a cryptogram concealing a remarkable cache of symbols secreted within a deceptive, cosmic verse. When the grid of the square is disassembled and its letters are laid out in series, they may be recombined to form the words Pater Noster twice over. This recombinant mélange of letters affords but one N, thus Grösser decided that the resulting form of the secreted message must be of a cruciform arrangement, recalling the Two A's and unused. The rows and columns of the square are arranged in accordance with the first of four sayings of St. John the Baptist in the beginning of the Gospel according to St. John: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end." The rotas square, then, lacked Christian significance. This led him to carry out revealing the content of the magic square that Grösser rejected.

Thus, Grösser's rotas square is a cryptogram beyond metrics, a palindromic secret concealed by its Latin translation, dependent on either a pure insight such as that of the square as a wordplay artifact or a logical and historical research that is the recurrent end. What is the recurrent end?

Within several years, archaeologists discovered the first of four rotas, and in a couple of years (Rostovtzeff, 1936). As a report of the Grösser rotas and its translation of the square's secreted content, Grösser to conclude that the rotas had been subdivided into smaller units. All the translation of the rotas square was locked within the hollow of a Celtic cross. The things thus broach the question of what is the recurrent end and the secreted meaning of the rotas square.
In 1899, a book appeared square in its held that this discovered, to date the pa- lindromic to (1899). This Roman hand barbarization left of a truly Perhaps the for there is serve their awsome history

Thus, Grösser believed he had revealed circumstances of the rotas magic square which demonstrate its particular role as communication beyond metrical dress and surface grammar. The intended meaning of the square is imbedded further within it than its epigraph extends. Its palindromic structure dissimulates its significance, or the message intended by its bearers, and a comprehension of its true meaning is dependent on either some sort of initiation into its mystery, or a penetrating insight such as Grösser's. And although the intended functional role of the square as language is yet to be proven with hard facts from archaeology and history, what better way to signify the mystical presence of a god that is the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega, than with the recurrent symmetry of a palindromic verse where any beginning can be its end?

Within seven years Grösser's hypothesis was confirmed. In 1933 archaeologists digging at Dura-Europos in the Syrian desert found the first of four more examples of the magic square, all beginning with rotas, and in a city of Roman occupation (Rostovtzeff, 1934; Rostovtzeff, 1936). As a result, the scholarship came out in almost unanimous support of the Grösser article, citing the discoveries as proof of a definite Roman environment for the square and finding grounds for agreement on early Christian influences in its creation. Dornseiff, in fact, wrote to Grösser to congratulate him on his interpretation, accepting it openly (Rostovtzeff, 1934). Thus, it appeared at last that the magic square had been subdued and its mystery plumbed, a fact accomplished not by its translation but through a recognition of the mystical significance locked within its palindromic structure. The recurrent symmetry of the rotas verse seems to have been intended to signify the concept of a Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus and the mystic interconnectedness of things thus brought about, at least for the vision of the early Christians who appear to have been its creators. And what a consolation it must have been for desperate times, a salve against the jagged fear of fugitive days and nights.

The story of Dura had been an intriguing one, and it had added great-
ly to the modern understanding of the early mysticism of the Christian church. Discovered at a site near the middle of the Euphrates River, at the junction of the north-south desert route which lay alongside the river and a dusty road that stretched westwards toward Palmyra, it was a city from the lands of King Solomon. Its ruins had been excavated from the banks of the Euphrates and the blowing Syrian sands by French and American expeditions between 1920 and 1937. The city itself had probably been established by the Seleucids at the end of the fourth century B.C., and it appears to have fallen to the sacking of the Sassanians around the year 256 A.D. Dura-Europos was laid out on a grid system, and its inhabitants worshipped many deities and spoke many tongues, judging from the tremendous variation in archaeo-religious artifacts. Unearthed were temples to the Palmyrene gods Artemis, Megistos, Mithras, and others which had for centuries been the solitary guardians of many frescoes, reliefs, papyri, and scrolls rich in the lore and symbolism of a culture abruptly cut short near the end of the third century A.D. Perhaps the rarest discovery was that of the earliest Christian church ever uncovered, proudly displaying a figure of Christ as the Good Shepherd above its crumbling baptistry (Wright). A synagogue was also uncovered, with a series of frescoes depicting scenes from the Old Testament.

Dura had been manned by an auxiliary cohort of troops under the direction of a Roman actuarium during its last vibrant century. Three of the four magic squares were found on the walls of this actuarium office. Thus, in all probability the square was made under the hand of a Roman soldier, most likely an educated one, for the square appears in close vicinity with an inscription that is a fragment of a line from Virgil. The evidence further suggests that it was the soldiers of the various Roman garrisons who carried both the square and the early mystic and persecuted Christianity to the extremes of the Roman Empire, as they had done with Mithraic Mazes a century before (Carcopino, 1953-65). The origin of the rotae square could then be dated roughly in correspondence with the various persecutions of Christians during the years immediately following the death of Jesus of Nazareth, but it would be difficult at this point to be any more specific than perhaps the two centuries which separate the crucifixion and the fall of Dura. Certain French writers have, however, ventured more precise estimates, naming not only a place for its creation but also an author. The distinguished French scholar Jérôme Carcopino and others have thought that the rotae square takes its source from St. Irenaeus of Lyon, who created it for the needs of his terrorized congregation in the Rhone valley of southern France, whose fate it had been to be thrown to wild beasts in the arena during the festival of the imperial cult in the summer of 177 A.D. (Carcopino, 1953-65; Danielou, 1961).

The year 1935 saw the publication of Guillaume de Jerphanion's very persuasive and thorough article on the mystic Christian symbolism and origin of the square, combining old theories with new facts. Convinced by the archaeological record at Dura and Cirencester, he supported the Grösser hypothesis with an exhaustive collation of evidence. The conclusions at which he arrived are easily regarded as monumental, and they went far beyond the poetical exegesis and translation offered by

Jérôme Carcopino
A. Michel
Jean Danielou
Franz Dornseifer
Adolf Erman
Felix Grösser
Archiv für Geschichte der Religionswissenschaft, vol. 3, fasc. 4, 1927
K. Haverfield
L. H. Green
Guillaume de Jerphanion
ROTAE OI ATICAM
Adolf Erman
M. I. Rostovtzeff
Franz Dornseifer
Archiv für Geschichte der Religionswissenschaft, vol. 3, fasc. 4, 1927
C. Wescher,
XXXV (1894), p.

M. I. Rostovtzeff
Guillaume de Jerphanion
Guillaume de Jerphanion
M. I. Rostovtzeff
Franz Dornseifer
C. Wescher,
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Weschler in 1874. Jerphanion brought the weight of sixty more years of scholarship on the rotas square, including an entire library of archaeological information, to bear on his conclusions making them stick. The archaeological record tended to support a meaning derived from the intaglio structure of the square, and not from its superficial grammar. However, neither of the two writers was long in favor. Before the year was out, new discoveries would come to light that would discredit the dating given the origin of the square by Jerphanion, drawing that date further into the past and finally into obscurity. These further developments firmly bind the rotas square to a much larger, literary tradition of palindromes which recedes at last into prehistory and the vanishing point of languages.

But this history does not merely trace the outlines of an obscure usage of language symbolism or an unlikely verse form. Language is a retrospective project: a history of the meanings which have been rendered with gestural, spoken, and literary forms is a landscape of sepulchres and their entombed significances which, with every human utterance, are brought to bear on present meanings. The widespread occurrence of the rotas square throughout the classical and medieval worlds allies itself historically with other magic squares around the Mediterranean to suggest a common symbolism, which the process of time has worn away. In order to better know our language as a tradition, as a way of grasping reality, the key to this lost symbolism must be restored so that we may understand how we were once touched by the meaning which lay between words. Without this, the references achieved by such symbolisms shall forever move anonymously along their shifting paths within the mainstream of language, which is in a way our common memory.

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