

An Early Christian Cryptogram?

Duncan FISHWICK, M.A.
University of St. Michael's College, Toronto

Serious investigation of the origin and nature of the *Rotas-Sator* square began in 1881 with the publication of Köhler's historical survey in *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*.¹ A vigorous and protracted debate has been illuminated from time to time by the brilliant researches of modern archaeology; but despite almost eighty years of academic controversy no conclusive solution has yet been found to the mystery of the 'magic square'.

This construction was a cryptic rebus which appears in two different forms, an earlier and a later. Both consist of a symmetrical combination of five words, each of five letters, the whole forming a square which can be read in four different directions.

ROTAS	SATOR
OPERA	AREPO
TENET	TENET
AREPO	OPERA
SATOR	ROTAS

The formula has a long history. The earliest text was at one time thought to be a Copic papyrus of the fourth or fifth century A.D.,² but recent discoveries have now dated it in the Roman period. During the campaign of 1931-2, excavations at Dura-Europus on the Euphrates, conducted under Rostovtzeff by Yale University and the French Academy of Inscriptions and Letters, unearthed three specimens on the walls of a military office in what had originally been the temple of Azzanathkona.³ The following year a fourth was discovered, all of which must have been inscribed before the Persians destroyed Dura soon after A.D. 256. The finds at Dura vindicated a third or fourth century British specimen scratched on a fragment of wall plaster from Victoria Road, Cirencester, in Gloucestershire.

¹ 13 (1881) 301-306. The best bibliography of the immense amount of literature subsequently devoted to this subject is contained in the article of M. Harald Fuchs, "Die Herkunft der Satorformel," *Schweizerisches Archiv für Volkskunde* 47 (1951) 28-54.

² F. Dornseiff, *Das Alphabet in Mystik and Magie*²(Leipzig 1925) 50, 179.

³ M. I. Rostovtzeff, *The Excavations at Dura-Europus : Preliminary Report of the Fifth Season* (New Haven 1934) 159-161; and *op. cit. Sixth Season (ibid. 1936)* 486

Haverfield had long before attributed this to a Roman date,⁴ but his theory was discounted at the time, since no other instances were then known which could be dated before the Early Middle Ages, and because the only evidence at Cirencester was the letter forms (principally the A's) and the general Romano-British character of the find spot. Five years after the discoveries at Dura, Della Corte, supervising excavations at Pompeii, came across a version written on a column near the amphitheatre.⁵ This discovery now led to the proper restoration of a similar, though fragmentary, example he had already published in 1929 from the house of a Publius Paquius Proculus, also at Pompeii.⁶ The latest specimen to be recovered, a third century *Rotas* Square from Altofen, Budapest, was found in 1954 and published with a commentary in German and Russian by Szilágyi in *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*.⁷ The formula here appears on a roof tile from the *villa publica* of ancient Aquincum, the residence of the imperial governor of *Pannonia Inferior*.

The later history of the charm spans the sixth century to the nineteenth and embraces the continents of Europe, Africa, and America.⁸ In France the earliest example occurs in a Carolingian Bible of 822, originally the property of the monastery of Saint-Germain-des-Près. In the twelfth century it is inscribed on the masonry of the Church of St. Laurent near Ardèche and in the keep of Loches, while in the thirteenth century parchment of Aurillac it apparently intercedes for women in labour. By the fifteenth century it has become a touchstone against fire in the Chateaux of Chinon and of Jarnac and in the courthouse of Valbonnais; but it is not until the sixteenth century that its efficacy as a cure for insanity and for fever is described in two early books, *De Varia Quercus Historia*, by Jean du Choul (Lyons 1555), and *De Rerum Varietate*, by Jérôme Cardan, a medical astrologer, (Milan 1557).

Perhaps the most extraordinary case related here is that of a citizen of Lyons who recovered from insanity after eating three crusts of bread, each inscribed with the magic square. This repast was punctuated by the recitation of five paternosters in remembrance of the five wounds of Christ and of the five nails of the Cross: *Pro quinque vulneribus Christi, quae moriendo accepit, nec non pro clavibus*. This local association of the square with the Lord's Prayer and the nails may go back to the second century bishop of Lyons, St. Irenaeus, who himself had a devotion to the five 'summits' of the Cross: *et ipse habitus crucis fines et summitates habet*

⁴ *ArchJ* 56 (1899) 319-323. *EphEp* IX. 1001.

⁵ *RendPont* 3rd ser. 12 (1936) 379-400.

⁶ *NSc* 6th ser. 5 (1929) 449, no. 112.

⁷ 2 (1954) 305-310. *cf.* M. Jérôme Carcopino, "Encore le carré magique," *CRAI* (1955) 500-507.

⁸ The following examples are taken from the inventory of G. de Jerphanion, "La formule magique SATOR AREPO on ROTAS OPERA, vieilles théories et faits nouveaux," *RecSciRel* 25 (1935) 188-225. (hereafter referred to as Jerphanion, *Formule*). *cf.* M. J. Carcopino, "Le Christianisme secret du carré magique," *MusHelv* 5 (1948) 16.59. (hereafter referred to as Carcopino, *Carré*).

*quinque, duas in longitudine et duas in latitudine et unam in medio in quo requiescit qui clavis affigitur.*⁹

Knowledge of the charm was not confined to Europe. In his *Arithmologia* (Rome 1665) R. P. Kircher relates that on a voyage to Abyssinia he had discovered that the Ethiopians invoke their Saviour by enumerating the five nails of the Cross, namely: SADOR, ALADOR, DANET, ADERA, RODAS – clearly the five words of the square in a corrupt form. A similar usage appears in a version from a tomb near Faras in Nubia where the five words follow a Coptic phrase which has been interpreted to mean “the names of the nails of Christ’s Cross.”¹⁰ In the eleventh century, on the other hand, the five words were used in Abyssinia to denote the five wounds of Christ.¹¹

Other regions found other applications for the formula. In Cappadocia, in the time of Constantine VII, Porphyrogenitus (913-959), the shepherds of the Nativity story are called SATOR, AREPON, and TENETON,¹² while a Byzantine bible of an earlier period conjures out of the square the baptismal names of the three Magi, ATOR, SATOR, and PERATORAS.¹³ By the end of the Middle Ages its prophylactic magic was firmly established in the superstition of Italy, Serbia Germany, Iceland, and even North America. The most recent example comes from nineteenth century South America, where it was still in use to cure dog-bites and snake-bites.¹⁴

The traditional popularity and astonishing versatility of this charm have led scholars to believe that the words conceal a meaning other than the obvious: “The Sower AREPO (whatever that may mean) holds the wheels with care.” Such convictions have reaped the scorn and ridicule of sceptics who hold that the sole, intrinsic merit of the formula is that it is a perfect palindrome. The composition of palindromes was, in fact, a pastime of Roman landed gentry. Sidonius,¹⁵ writing to Burgundius, neatly defines such lines which can be read equally well from end to beginning as from beginning to end: *Hi nimirum sunt recurrentes qui metro stante neque litteris loco motis ut ab exordio ad terminum sic a fine releguntur ad summum*. He then recalls to his correspondent a stock example:

Roma tibi subito motibus ibit amor

⁹ Irenaeus *adv. Haer.* 2.24.4.

¹⁰ W. E. Crum, “Coptic Studies,” *EEF* (1897-1898) 63. *cf.* J. Simon, *AnalBoll* 49 (1931) 165

¹¹ H. Ludolf, *Ad Historiam Arthiopicam Commentarius* (Frankfurt a./M. 1695) 351.

¹² G. de Jerphanion, *Les églises rupestres de Cappadoce* (Paris 1925) I, 78 and 158 and pl. 38, no. 1.

¹³ Jerphanion, *Formule* 204.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 206-215. *cf.* G. Gardner, *Travels in the Interior of Brazil ... during the Years 1836-1841* (London 1846) 51-52.

¹⁵ 9.14.4-5. *cf.* 8.11.5.

That the scepticism attached to the Rebus was justified seemed at first confirmed by the recent Hungarian inscription from Aquincum.¹⁶ Here the *Rotas* square is preceded by two words *Roma tibi* on one line, and the letters *ta* on a second. Szilágyi read *sub* to the right of *tibi*, supposed that *ta* was a mistake for *to*, and concluded that here was an example of the very *versus recurrens* mentioned by Sidonius (*Roma tibi subito*). If this were so, it would be probable that the *Rotas* square also is simply a *versus recurrens* and devoid of any cryptic meaning.

Later inspection of this inscription by Marichal and Carcopino¹⁷ has, however, shown that this first reading was superficial and that the line should actually read *Roma tibi salus ita; i.e.*, these twenty-five letters enshrine a promise or hope of salvation which might well be appropriate for a Rome torn by imperial dissension or menaced by barbarians.¹⁸ The function of the *Rotas* charm immediately following might therefore be to secure this salvation. When it is further noted that the letters P and R in the square are barred in the manner of a Greek *tau* (a well known symbol at this time of the Cross) and that the inscription occupies a segment of a large cross of St. Andrew on the tile (this cross in the form of a *chi-iota* was symbolic to Christians of their saviour), it seems fairly obvious the *Rotas* rebus here is not merely a palindrome, but of some deeper significance.

If the sceptics have been unfortunate in their attempts to explain away the formula, little success has compensated the faithful for their credulity. Jules Quicherat¹⁹ suggested that the lines should be read *boustrophedon*, i.e., as the plough turns – left to right, right to left. This results in a reduplication of the same verse – SATOR OPERA TENET – TENET OPERA SATOR – which might conceivably be translated “As ye sow, so shall ye reap.” The main objection to this solution is that it entails the double use of TENET. Again, though the *Sator* square can be successfully read *boustrophedon*, there is a further difficulty with the *Rotas* square, whose first line must be read right to left, a procedure contrary to the rules of writing *boustrophedon*. A similar suggestion has been made by Grosjean,²⁰ who reads *sat orare poten*, i.e., Can you pray enough? The difficulty with this solution is that it is unfeasible in the case of the *Rotas* square, i.e., what is historically the earlier version of the Rebus.

Most attempted solutions have foundered on the word AREPO. One method has been to treat these five letters as initials or abbreviations. Some of the monstrosities this has produced are: SA(LVA)TOR A RE (X) P(ONTIFEX) O or

¹⁶ Carcopino (above, note 7) 500.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 506.

¹⁸ In A.D. 270 Pannonia was ravaged by the Goths and at the beginning of the fourth century was the cockpit of imperial conflicts. The date of the tile falls somewhere in this general period.

¹⁹ Carcopino, *Carré 27. cf. C. W. Ceram, The March of Archaeology* (New York 1958) 30.

²⁰ *JThS* N.S. 3 (1952) 97-98.

SATOR A R(ERUM) E (XTREMARUM) P(RINCIPIO) O(MNI).²¹ Alternatively, Haverfield & Collingwood²² treat the word as a proper noun, though admittedly one of no known connotation. Carcopino²³ also treats AREPO as ἄπαξ, but believes that the word is Celtic in derivation and means ‘plough’. This etymology is based primarily on a remark of Columella,²⁴ an agricultural writer of the first century A.D., who says that the Gauls call half an acre *arepennis*. Further evidence comes from Pliny,²⁵ who described the invention in Gallic *Raetia* of *plaumorati*, a new kind of plough whose principal feature was two small wheels or *rotulae*. Carcopino argues that ROTAS in the square is connected with *rotulae*, while AREPO is the Gallic plough. Confirmation of this theory is sought in a fourteenth-century Greek Bible²⁶ where a *Sator* square is translated into Greek: ὄσπεῖρων ἄροτρον καὶ εἰ ἔργα τρόχος. Here AREPO is translated by *arotron*, meaning plough. Any weight this might have carried is unfortunately undermined by the writer’s faulty knowledge of Latin, if not of Greek. Here *opera*, which must surely be, if anything, the ablative singular of *opera*, *operae*, is translated as though it were the accusative plural of *opus*, *operis*. AREPO also is apparently rendered by the accusative, making – along with τρόχους (meaning wheels) – a grand total of three accusatives in one sentence.²⁷ In any case, if AREPO really meant plough, one might justifiably ask what on earth the sower is doing with the plough.²⁸

The anagrammatic method of rearranging the letters of the square has provided a different approach. Attempts of this kind fall into two groups, those which have produced a fervent, pious prayer, and those which have revealed incantations to the Devil. Credible examples of the former are a formula for exorcism:

RETRO SATANA, TOTO OPERE ASPER, and the prayers:
 ORO TE PATER, ORO TE PATER, SANAS
 O PATER, ORES PRO AETATE NOSTRA
 ORA, OPERARE, OSTENTA TE PASTOR

²¹ Jerphanion, *Formule* 221.

²² Haverfield (above, note 4) 320. R. G. Collingwood, *The Archaeology of the Roman Empire* (London 1930) 176.

²³ Carcopino, *Carré* 28-29. This was previously suggested by F. Dölger, *IXΘΥΣ* 5 (1932) 57-64.

²⁴ 5.1.6.

²⁵ *H.N.* 18.9.

²⁶ Bibliothèque Nationale *Cod. Par. gr.* 2511, fol. 60.

²⁷ Perhaps some allowance should be made for the exigencies of the metre (iambic trimeter).

²⁸ It is possible that the word is philologically insoluble. cf. D. Atkinson, “The Origin and Date of the BATOR Word-Square,” *JEcclesH* 2 (1951) 7-8, 13-14 (hereafter referred to as Atkinson, Origin). In an ingenious investigation of the square’s constructional development, he suggests that AREPO is simply the palindrome of OPERA and, as such, is a nonsense word. But cf. note 71.

To the second category belong the spells of black magic:

SATAN, ORO TE, PRO ARTE A TE SPERO
SATAN, TER ORO TE, OPERA PRAESTO
SATAN, TER ORO TE, REPARATO OPES.²⁹

Perhaps the most ingenious of these anagrams is that of a German, Kuno Von Hardenberg,³⁰ who believed he had discovered in the square a reference to the comfort the Rose of Sharon is said to have brought to St. Peter for his sin in denying Christ. PETRO ET REO PATET ROSA SARONA; i.e., 'For Peter even guilty the rose of Sharon is open.' Unfortunately, the authority given for this incident, Acts 9. 35, is dubious, and there is no reference to the Rose of Sharon, at least in the Vulgate. We must conclude therefore that this incident is apocryphal (possibly a poetic tradition) and as suspect as the Latinity of Von Hardenberg's solution. An equally impossible answer is that of Kolgerg,³¹ who simplified his task by having recourse to abbreviations and calmly deduced from the twenty-five letters of the square the thirty-six letters of the monastic rule. SAT ORARE POTEN (TER) ET OPERA(RE) R(ATI)O T(U)A S(IT).

Although none of these solutions are of more than moderate credibility, it was clear that some convincing Christian explanation might eventually be found. Then, in 1924, C. Frank³² made the startling discovery that the square could be so arranged as to produce the first words of the Lord's Prayer twice over (except that there was only one N instead of two), plus two A's and two O's. Shortly afterwards, Grosser³³ came to the independent conclusion that this unique combination could be explained by a cruciform arrangement whereby the N was used twice. The remaining four letters, two A's and two O's, would then be disposed thus:

A
P
A
T
E
R
R
APATERNOSTERO
O
S
T
E

²⁹ Jerphanion, *Formule* 222

³⁰ *Darmstädter Tageblatt* (1935) no. 69.

³¹ *ZIE* 19 (1887) 72.

³² *Die Deutschen Gaue* 25 (1924) 76.

³³ "Ein neuer Vorschlag zur Deutung der Satorformel," *ArchRTW* 24 (1926) 165-169. cf. S. Agrell, *Runornas talmystik och dess antika fdöebild* (Lund 1927) 32.

R
O

A theory such as this cannot be proved. Its strength lies in its intrinsic probability, plus the fact that the mathematical odds against such a combination occurring by chance are astronomical. Frank was subsequently supported by Jerphanion, who in an exhaustive investigation of the square's origin and history added a rider.³⁴ He reported that a correspondent had pointed to the position of the T's, which are in every case flanked by A and O.

ROTAS
O E A
TENET
A E O
SATOR

The first literary reference to the use of the T as a symbol of the Cross is in an obscure passage in the *Epistle of Barnabas*.³⁵

Learn therefore children of love concerning all things abundantly, that Abraham, who first appointed circumcision, looked forward in the spirit unto Jesus, when he circumcised, having received the ordinances of three letters. For the scripture saith: "And Abraham circumcised of his household eighteen males and three hundred." What then was the knowledge given unto him? Understand ye that he saith the 'eighteen' first, and then after an interval 'three hundred'. In the eighteen, I stands for ten, H for eight. Here thou hast Jesus (IHΣOYΣ). And because the cross in the T (= 300) was to have grace, he saith also 'three hundred'. So he revealeth Jesus in the two letters, and in the remaining one, the Cross.

The A/O sign does not appear in inscriptions until the end of the third century; but scriptural authority for its early use as a Christian description of God the Father and of Christ can be found in three passages of the Apocalypse.³⁶

It might be thought that with the recognition of so many Christian symbols in combination the mystery of the *Rotas* square was solved. Grosser, unaware of the Cirencester square which Haverfield claimed to be Roman, had suggested that the formula originated at some time in the period before the Peace of the Church, and predicted that Roman examples would soon be found. The publication by Rostovtzeff of the examples from Dura-Europus seemed to fulfil this prophecy, and the majority of scholars, hastily recanting from their previous heresies, were now converted to the Christian interpretation of the square's origin.

³⁴ Jerphanion, *Formule* 225, note 102.

³⁵ 9.8 *cf.* St. Justin *I Apol.* 4.2-8; 9.7-9. Tertullian *adv. Marc.* 3.22.

³⁶ Rev. 1.8; 21.6; 22.-3. *cf.* Gabrol-Leclercq, "A/Ω," *DACL* 1 (1924) 1-26 at 4.

The discovery at Pompeii, however, of specimens reasonably conjectured to be earlier than A.D. 79, together with the implied presence of Christians before the eruption of Vesuvius, presented grave difficulties. These were formulated by Jerphanion at a meeting of the Académie des Inscriptions in 1937.³⁷ (a) It is improbable, though by no means impossible, that there were Christians at Pompeii before it was destroyed. (b) The configuration of the intersecting PATERNOSTER's presupposes that the Cross was already a Christian symbol before A.D. 79. This usage is not otherwise known before the *Epistle of Barnabas*, whose date of composition is probably A.D. 130-131. (c) If the square had been invented by Christians of the first century, it ought to have been in Greek, since Greek rather than Latin seems to have been used for teaching and liturgy. (d) The Christian use of A and O was inspired by the passages in the Apocalypse, which in A.D. 79 'n'était pas écrite.' (e) Cryptic Christian symbols first appear during the persecutions of the third century.

In the face of these difficulties, Carcopino³⁸ has argued that the Pompeian examples were, in fact, written after the eruption by treasure seekers burrowing among the ruins. Della Corte, himself, describes the evidence for these early excavations,³⁹ and in the house of Popidius Priscus⁴⁰ an inscription in rough letters on the right wall of the vestibule, reads Δομμος Περτουσα, i.e., *domus pertusa*.⁴¹ No one would deny that this graffito was written after the eruption; but the same is not true of the graffito bearing the undamaged Rebus. This was neatly inscribed on the plaster of a column of the *Palaestra*. This building lies away from the better-class houses, where clandestine scavengers would be most likely to dig. In any case, the undisturbed nature of the ground precludes their presence here. It should be explained that, when Vesuvius erupted, a layer of fine ash was deposited, which covered the bodies of men and animals who were asphyxiated and buried. Above this ash is a second stratum of small stones and dust, where it would be easy to detect crude digging. Any treasure hunter wishing to write the graffito would have had to penetrate both strata, a disturbance which could hardly have escaped the notice of the excavators directed by Della Corte.

If, then, the Pompeian squares were inscribed before A.D. 79, some alternative solution must be found. Could they, in fact, have been the work of Christians? There were certainly Christians in Rome. Tacitus, speaking of the disturbances of A.D. 64, when the fire of Rome touched off the first great persecution, refers to Christians as an *ingens multitudo*.⁴² This may be rhetorical exaggeration, but there

³⁷ *CRAI* (1937) 84-93.

³⁸ *Carré* 44-49. For a discussion of Carcopino's attempt to find the origin and date of the square in the persecution at Lyons, A.D. 177, cf. Atkinson, *Origin* 13-15.

³⁹ "Esplorazioni di Pompei immediatamente successive alla catastrofe dell'anno 79," *In Memoria Vasile Parvan* (Bucharest 1934) 96-109.

⁴⁰ *Reg.* 1; *Ins.* 7.

⁴¹ *CIL* IV. 2311. cf. Atkinson, *Origin* 8.13.

⁴² *Ann.* 15.44

is clear evidence of quarrels between Christians and Jews under Claudius.⁴³ Again, in his Epistle to the Romans, St. Paul speaks with awe of the Church at Rome as a comparatively old institution.⁴⁴ We know, too, that St. Paul once stayed at Puteoli, only a few miles from Pompeii.⁴⁵ There is ample evidence of communication between the two towns (e.g., a graffito found at Pompeii recording greetings to the colony of Puteoli⁴⁶ and it is hard to believe that news of St. Paul, or of the Christians, had never travelled from Puteoli.

Some archaeological evidence may possibly support these general considerations. In the town of Herculaneum, which is adjacent to Pompeii and was also destroyed in the eruptions, excavations have unearthed a large, two-storey house of about A.D. 50. A panel of stucco in an upper apartment has been discovered bearing the imprint of a cross.⁴⁷ Traces of nails suggest that the cross was of wood, while other nails in the panel may mean that the cross was removed and a cover placed over the area. With this may be compared a similar cross on a panel of white stucco from Pompeii. This was published by Mazois in 1824, along with a celebrated inscription written with charcoal in the *atrium* of house no. 22.⁴⁸

This evidence, however, is tenuous in the extreme. Crosses do not necessarily imply the presence of Christians,⁴⁹ and the character of the find spot at Herculaneum, with its wooden dice box and loose die, has been held to rule out any religious connection. The cross at Pompeii has never been accepted as genuine, and when the original charcoal inscription faded, sceptics were quick to emphasize discrepancies in the two copies of the original.⁵⁰ In the present state of the archaeological record, the most that can be said is that there may have been a few, solitary Christians in the area. There is certainly no justification for supposing the existence of a Christian community, and it need hardly be stressed that their presence at Pompeii would offer no solution to the remaining difficulties of Jerphanion.

⁴³ Suet. *Claud.* 25. Perhaps these quarrels helped to focus official attention on the Christians. *cf.* an imperial edict of this period, found possibly at Nazareth, decreeing the death penalty for anyone who destroys a tomb, or casts out the buried, or 'with evil intent removes them to some other spot.' M. P. Charlesworth, *Documents Illustrating the Reigns of Claudius and Nero* (Cambridge 1939) 15, no. 17.

⁴⁴ 15.20.

⁴⁵ Acts 28.13.

⁴⁶ *CIL* IV. 2152.

⁴⁷ For a summary of the detailed description by A. Maiuri (*RendPont* 15 [1939] 193 ff) see Atkinson, *Origin* 16-17.

⁴⁸ *Reg. 7; Ins. cf. Les Ruines de Pompeii*, 2e partie, (Paris 1824), 84 ff.

⁴⁹ It has been suggested that the cross was merely the imprint of a wall bracket. This explanation, however, does not account for the projection of the vertical stave above the transverse, nor for the symmetrical increase of width of the transverse groove towards both ends. *cf.* Atkinson, *Origin* 17.

⁵⁰ E.g. .CHRISTIAN., and CHRISTIANOS *CIL* IV, 679.

A pagan origin for the square is also unlikely. It has been argued by Sundwall⁵¹ that it has its roots in the Orphism popular in South Italy. On this interpretation, the Sower is Triptolemus, while the wheels symbolize the plough, which is one of his attributes. An Italian origin is also suggested by Eitrem,⁵² who points to the central N marking the nave of the wheel whose four spokes are NET.

T
E
TENET
E
T

The meaning would then be NET (neoI spin) OPERA ROTAS (= *rotans*), i.e., “She (a deity, demon, or the inscription itself) spins her works revolving.” Neither of these theories gives a convincing explanation of the complete square, and it should be noted that both abandon Grosser’s important discovery. As has already been stated, the odds against the fortuitous occurrence of the double PATERNOSTER with the A’s and O’s are extremely high.

We are left with the probability that the Pompeian examples are Jewish. Large numbers of Jews had, in fact, been settled in Pompeii⁵³ and its neighbourhood in 62 B.C. after Pompey’s campaigns in the East. Their reputation as superstitious charlatans and dabblers in magic had been widespread since the days of Moses,⁵⁴ and they were notorious for their use of magic talismen, amulets, spells, and riddles.⁵⁵ Word magic, alphabetic acrostics, and gematria, by which a numerical value was ascribed to the individual letters of a word, played an important part in Jewish exorcism, cosmogonic theories, and the symbolic representation of divine powers.⁵⁶ Not only were the letters of the alphabet believed to comprehend all knowledge, but the written word, in particular, was held to be charged with

⁵¹ “L’enigmata iscrizione ROTAS in Pompei,” *Acta Academie Aboensis Humaniora* 15, 5 (1945) 16-17.

⁵² “The SATOR AREPO Formula once more,” *Eranos* 48 (1950) 73-74.

⁵³ The best discussion of Jewish influences at Pompeii is by J. P. Frey, “Les Juifs à Pompéi,” *RBibl* 42 (1933) 365-384. For Jewish inscriptions from Pompeii written in Latin see *Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum* I, 562-567.

⁵⁴ Origen *contra Celsum* 1.26. cf. Th. Reinach, *Textes d’auteurs grecs et romains relatifs au judaïsme* (Paris 1895) 165. The origin of this is probably to be found in the episode of the six plagues of Egypt. Ex 7-11.

⁵⁵ M. Simon, *Verus Israel* (“Bibl. des écoles franc. d’Athènes et de Rome,” fasc. 166; Paris 1948) 394-431.

⁵⁶ R. Marcus, “Alphabetic Acrostics in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods,” *JNES* 6 (1947) 109-115.

magic.⁵⁷ Hence the efficacy of the palindrome, whose magic could not be destroyed whichever way the spell be read.

A rebus which is typical of this magic genre may well have been inscribed by Latin-speaking Jews, familiar with Hebrew and the Hebraic method of writing. Such a solution would also provide a convincing answer to the difficulties inherent in a Christian origin. Although the A/0 sign may not have been in Christian use before its appearance in the Apocalypse,⁵⁸ the idea occurs much earlier in such passages as Ex. 3.14; Is. 41.4, and 44.6. The letters *aleph* and *thau* are also used in the Talmud to symbolize completeness and totality.⁵⁹ The appearance of this symbolism in a Jewish rebus would therefore be quite plausible, particularly in conjunction with the T's of TENET.⁶⁰ These may best be explained not as Christian crosses, but as a Latin form of the Jewish *thau* sign, the symbol of salvation which, in the vision of Ezekiel, saved the Just from the avenging angel.⁶¹ This mark in its archaic form (+) appears regularly on ossuaries of the Hellenistic and early Roman periods, particularly at Jerusalem.⁶² The central position of the N may also be significant. The Jews attached a peculiar power to the mere pronouncement of the

⁵⁷ A famous example of word-play occurs in the Talmud : "...R. Akibah expounded: When husband and wife are worthy, the Schechinah abides with them; when they are not worthy, fire consumes them. Raba said The fire which results from the woman is severer than that from the man. What is the reason? In the case of the former, the letters *aleph* and *shin* are consecutive but not in the case of the man." R. Dr. I Epstein *The Babylonian Talmud* (London 1938) Sotah fol. 17a, 89.

The Hebrew letters of the word for 'husband' are *aleph*, *yod* and *shin*, and for wife, *aleph*, *shin* and *he*. *Yod* and *he* form the Divine Name; but if these are omitted, only *aleph* and *shin* are left, which form the word *esh*, meaning 'fire'. The fire from the woman is 'severer' since in the word for 'woman' or 'wife' it is the first and second letters which form *esh*; in the word for man or husband the first and third letters form *esh*.

R.. Akibah. is also credited with a meditation on the individual letters of the alphabet. cf. H. L. Strack, *An Introduction to the Talmud and Midrasch* (Philadelphia 1931) 229, 347, n. 4. A magic square in Hebrew (of a much period than the *Rotas* square) is attributed to Abraham Ben Meir Ibn Ezra (A.D. 1092.1167). cf. A. G. Eschkol, *The Encyclopaedia Iudaica* (Berlin 1928) II, 49.

⁵⁸ See above, note 36.

⁵⁹ For full documentation see H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud and Midrasch*² (Munich 1954) III, 789 (on Rev. 1.8). The idea also occurs in Martial *Epig.* 9.95.

⁶⁰ See above, note 34.

⁶¹ Ez. 9. 1-6. The intersecting TENET'S may also be a cryptic than sign.

⁶² e.g. in the district known as *Dominus Flevit*. B. Baggatti and J. T. Milik, *Gli scavi del 'Dominus Flevit', I, La necropoli del periodo romano* (Jerusalem 1958) 6-9. cf. RBibl 66 (1959) 299-301.

This is probably the best interpretation of the cross-signs on the Talpiyyotb Ossuaries. *Contra* E. L. Sukenik, *AJA* 51 (1947) 351-361.

'Name', in particular of the Divine Name.⁶³ As the initial letter of the word *nomen*, *N* might also serve here as the Latin equivalent of the Hebraic נש , the unique Divine Name, fount of Divine Power and centre and origin of all things.⁶⁴

A Jewish origin also provides a satisfactory explanation for the resolved form of the Rebus, the *Paternoster* amulet. Not only are the positions of the A's and O's and the central N even more striking, but the overall configuration is clearly an archaic *thau*. Most significant of all is the use of the *Pater Noster*. Far from being a Christian innovation, this form of address has its roots in Judaism.⁶⁵ In the Babylonian and Palestinian recensions of the *Schemone Esre*⁶⁶ God is frequently addressed as 'Our Father',⁶⁷ and a similar invocation to 'Our Father' is found in the prayers of Rabbi Eliezer (died *ca* A.D. 90) and Rabbi Akiba (died *ca* A.D. 135).⁶⁸ It seems possible, then, that the *Pater Noster* invocation was as familiar to the Latin-speaking Jews of Pompeii as to any (hypothetical) Christians.

The remaining question is the proper interpretation of ROTAS OPERA TENET AREPO SATOR. Despite efforts to trace its imagery to the Ezekiel passage⁶⁹ or to the concept of *logos* as charioteer,⁷⁰ no explanation has ever convincingly elucidated its Delphic meaning. It is doubtful whether such attempts are justified or legitimate. These are simply five words ingeniously evolved from the *Paternoster* charm in such a way that, when properly combined, they form a square which can be read in four, different directions. The 'magic' of the square is basically the perfect symmetry of its component letters. These also betray cryptic Jewish symbols to those who know their origin and secret. To construct such a square from the *Paternoster* amulet is a technical achievement of the highest order.

⁶³ M. Simon (above, note 55) 400-403.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 411.

⁶⁵ It is not the province of this paper to discuss the possible derivation of the Lord's Prayer from the Jewish Amidah or *Tephillah*. For this see Strack. Billerbeck (above, note 59) I, 392.396 (on Mt. 6.4) and 406-416 (on Mt. 6.9). *cf.* Ch. Guignebert, "Le Pater," *Mélanges G. Glotz* (Paris 1932) I, 417-430.

⁶⁶ The *Schemone Ezre* is composed of eighteen Blessings, the oldest parts of which belong to a period well before the birth of Christ. *cf.* W. Bousset, *Die Religion des Judentums in späthellenistischen Zeitalter* (Tübingen 1926) 84, 176, 377.

⁶⁷ e.g., in the Babylonian recension, petition 5: Lead us back, Our Father, to Thy Torah...; petition 6: Forgive us, Our Father, for we have sinned; in the Palestinian recension, petition 4: Grant us, Our Father, knowledge of Thee, and comprehension and understanding from Thy Torah; petition 6: Forgive us, Our Father, when we have sinned against Thee. For a discussion of this form of prayer, see Guignebert (above, note 65) 426-430.

⁶⁸ *Cf.* Strack-Billerbeck (above, note 59) I, 394 and 410.

⁶⁹ e.g. G. de Jerphanion, "Du nouveau sur la formule magique ROTAS OPERA," *RecSciRel* 27 (1937) 326-335.

For a similar theory by F. Cumont see *RendPont* 13 (1937) 7.

⁷⁰ Philo *de Iuga et Inventione* 101.

To require that the individual words, one of which, the palindrome of OPERA,⁷¹ is not even a Latin word, will also be meaningful when read concurrently⁷² is to expect the impossible. Any superficial meaning therefore which may be allegedly wrung from them is purely accidental.

The final verdict on the origin of the *Rotas-Sator* square is clearly dependent on future archaeological discoveries. But in the present state of the evidence it seems reasonable to conclude that this charm, at least in the form we now have it,⁷³ originated with Latin-speaking Jews (presumably settled in Italy) in the period immediately prior to the Christian Era. Such an origin is itself sufficient explanation of its cryptic form; alternatively, it may have been a product of the pogroms of, e.g., A.D. 19 or A.D. 49. It would seem that it fell into disuse, to be revived later as a Christian symbol amid the new enthusiasm for symbolism characteristic of the third century and later.⁷⁴ Perhaps its obscurity in the meantime explains why its origin was forgotten and its Christianity so readily accepted.

⁷¹ D. Daube (*Expository Times* 62 [1951] 316) sees in AREPO a Hebrew or Aramaic rendering of ALPHA O. The superficial meaning will then be “The Sower Alpha O holds the wheels with care.” Such an interpretation may have suggested itself to the initiated reader; but surely AREPO is primarily the palindrome of OPERA, just as BATOR is the palindrome of ROTAS.

⁷² These words were never written concurrently until the Early Middle Ages when they appear in a bastard form. See above, notes 10.13.

⁷³ This view does not exclude the possibility that the Latin version of this square may itself go back to a Hebrew or Aramaic prototype.

⁷⁴ e.g. at Dura-Europus, Aquincum, and Cirencester.