

# PALINDROMES: THE ROTAS PREHISTORY

DMITRI A. BORGMANN  
Dayton, Washington

There are, to be sure, things which are unutterable.  
These things make themselves manifest, they are what  
is mystical.

--Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (New York: Humanities Press, 1961),  
prop. 6.522

Clarity is fine for convincing; it is of no use for moving  
the emotions. Clarity of whatever kind strips away en-  
thusiasm. Poets, speak incessantly of eternity, infin-  
itude, immensity, time, space, divinity . . . Be obscure!

--Denis Diderot, Œuvres complètes de Diderot,  
ed. Assézat-Tourneux, 20 vols. (Paris: Gar-  
nier, 1875-77), vol. 2, p. 147

It was the third discovery of the rotas square that finally cast disrepute upon the third century A. D. dating of its origin. Systematic excavations of the ruins of Pompeii sponsored by the Italian government had revealed, in an open area southeast of the entangled remains of that city, a spacious palaestra or campus that had sustained some damage by tremors of Vesuvius prior to the violent eruption of 79 A. D. Repaired and most probably put back into service, this palaestra and its wide lawn were inscribed by a tall stone fence and buildings, ending with a porticoed structure on its western side supported by massive plaster columns. In 1936, an archaeologist named M. Della Corte noticed an example of the rotas square scratched deeply into a column of this western portico. Convinced at first that this was the emblem of looters who had, after the eruption, dug into the ash for treasures, he had discounted its importance. But the inscription had occurred at a convenient height for one standing in the portico, a troubling fact. Consulting his notes, Della Corte was at last reminded of an earlier discovery of the same inscription eleven years previously, in the house of Paquius Proculus and surrounded by the skeletons of children (Carcopino, 1953-65). Its importance he had underestimated at that time due to imperfections in the specimen, and only later did he collate and comprehend the nature of his discoveries. His findings were published within the year.

Jérôme Carcopino, who had attributed the creation of the rotas square to St. Irenaeus of Lyon, was overruled by the evidence from Pompeii. Irenaeus had been a priest assisting an aged bishop during a wave of local persecution under Marcus Aurelius, circa 177 A. D. The link between the Dura area and the congregation at Lyon is proposed by the fact that within the body of the congregation were numbered men and

women from the desert regions of Asia Minor. Carcopino had thus directed his comments on the origin and date of the rotas square from a pattern emerging from his observations on the philology of the word arepo, the Roman artifacts of the Rhone valley, and the history of the festival of the imperial cult at Lyon that year. However, the terrible persecutions had occurred more than a century after the magic square could have been fashioned at the latest possible date by a Pompeiian hand. Therefore, Carcopino's assessment of the origin of the square was out of focus, if only slightly. But this does not change the significance of the square for history, or for its bearers. The Grösser hypothesis would still hold for Pompeii in addition to Lyon, for there is a strong possibility that Christians were living in these and the surrounding cities at that early age who could have made good use of the magic square and its protective charm, regardless of whether or not Irenaeus had been its mystic creator (Atkinson, 1951).

Perhaps the means will never be made available to know for certain the secrets of the rotas square and its charismatic effects. On the other hand, perhaps there are archives still to be tapped which could yield insights detailing how the square figured in the minds of its bearers at Lyon and elsewhere in the empire, outside the Rhone valley. However, there remain now only mute testaments of the story bound up in the widely scattered specimen of the square sprinkled about Cirencester, Dura-Europos, and Lyon available for interpretation. Confined to these points of solitude, the story of the rotas square may never come in from the far distance to be told, for interpretation is more inviting to the imagination than it is to delicate scholarship, and only rarely do these two muse in concert.

Guillaume Jerphanion, who had so convincingly argued for the origin of the square around the second half of the third century A. D., twice issued palinodes within the following year. The archaeological record at Pompeii proposed to him evidence which was indisputably antagonistic to his earlier conclusions. Jerphanion was reluctant to admit the crucial presence of Christians in that city prior to the fatal eruption of Vesuvius. It seemed to him furthermore improbable that Latin was widely used by Christians at such an early date, pointing to evidence which insists on the exclusive use of the international Greek language in early Christian teaching and liturgy. In addition, he believes that the concealment of Christian symbols by means of cryptograms did not appear until the persecutions of the third century A. D. Taken separately, Jerphanion states, these arguments are inconclusive, but their combined weight is impressive and motivation enough to deny all prior reasoning (Atkinson, 1951).

However, in 1954 another specimen was found that upset forever the scope and character of the debate upon the origins of the rotas magic square. In that year an article was published by M. Szilagyi which showed the square fired into a clay tile taken from the excavated floor of the ruins of a building once standing in the Roman section of ancient Budapest (Szilagyi, 1954). This structure was the villa publica used by the Roman governors of the province since its construction around 107 A. D. The author assigns the debris of the tile to the first years of

the second century, but he has further remarks to make on its appearance. The red clay surface bears additional markings above the rotas square and to its left, details which truly open up the history of the magic square for anyone who seeks to know the associations it brought to mind for its bearers. The other inscription upon the face of the tile reads: Roma tibi sub/it... This incomplete line is actually a fragment of a palindromic couplet which finds its otherwise earliest record in a letter from Sidonius Apollinaris, fifth century bishop of Clermont, to his friend Burgundio, an orator asking for an explanation and a sampling of a palindromic verse. Sidonius replies with this illustration which he takes "from old" (sic est illud antiquum): Roma tibi subito motibus ibit amor. He then gives further examples of palindromes (re-currentes versus) which play on both the recurrent symmetry of letters and that of words (Anonymous, 1961).

The obvious occurrence of the rotas magic square alongside a fragment of the palindrome recorded by Sidonius on an artifact of such an early date makes prominent the association which the square has brought to mind for at least one member of that antiquated age -- that one member being the possessor of the hand which fashioned the two inscriptions and then fired the clay tile destined for the floor of the villa publica. And since for that one mind the rotas square can be put into perspective with a larger tradition of palindromic verse, why not assume that the association holds true for other minds as well? Certainly the formula of the rotas square fits into the range of palindromic verse comfortably enough, in fact it brings double emphasis to the grammatical elaboration of symmetry by virtue of its tidy arrangement into a magic square. And since the rotas square can be admitted as an example of a wider tradition, it would then be wise to study the mode of thinking transmitted through the tradition itself, using this example as a window. Perhaps something can be known of the paradigm through an examination of its enumerations.

The literary study of palindromes is opaque with history and in a confusing snarl of languages. A complete list of palindromes in Latin or any other language would, judging from present knowledge, require an infinite number of texts. Sidonius gives others in the same letter to Burgundio which illustrate the two aspects of recurrent verse. The first of these is arranged symmetrically, letter by letter, around a pivotal axis. This is in the familiar pattern of the rotas palindrome and the Roma tibi sub/it... inscription: Sole medere pedes, ede perede melos. Another specimen given by Sidonius is only slightly different, an example of the other aspect of palindromes. This recurring verse returns upon the spoken word, which is the atomic unit of the verse arranged in symmetry about a central axis. Hence the following couplet is given also as a palindrome:

Praecipiti modo quod decurrit tramite flumen  
 tempore consumptum iam cito deficient.  
 Deficient cito iam consumptum tempore flumen  
 tramite decurrit quod modo praecipiti.

Whether broken down letter by letter or word by word, the grammatical

articulation of symmetry remains intact. Nearly one hundred such palindromes have been resurrected from ancient Grecian codices of lyric poetry, many of which bear the stigma of mystic incantations and evocations of supernatural powers (Pétridès, 1909). One in particular has been found also to rim holy water basins and sacramental fonts throughout the Mediterranean (Preisendanz, 1949). This one is usually translated: "Wash my transgressions, not only my face."

The Palantine Anthology, which is the major anthology of Greek epigrams, contains nine palindromes which return upon the spoken word. These are authored by a minor poet from the first century, Nicodemus of Herculaneum, and they are somewhat incomplete, mostly consisting of but one line (Preisendanz, 1949; Didot, 1864). This type of utterance, it must be understood, is to be repeated in reverse series to complete the incantatory effect. Palindromes other than the rotas square were also entombed at Pompeii, from a time and a distance not far removed from the Herculaneum of Nicodemus (Pétridès, 1909). Perhaps the evidence then suggests a fad of palindroming during the first century A. D. However, the contrast between the two kinds of recorded verses -- those inscribed at large and as graffiti upon the walls of Pompeii, and those fashioned within the repose of a clerk and a scholar at Herculaneum -- may be too pronounced to assume that either hand was aware of what the other was doing. History has a habit of passing itself in the dark like this, a troublesome thought to those who seek in its records a single narrative line.

The Book of the Dead, an Egyptian religious work dating from more than a thousand years before Nicodemus, was intended to guide souls on their journey to the land of the dead. It is furthermore an artifact of ancient poetry; a persistent feature of the work is its lyric exultation in the experience of eternity. Magic incantations, prayers, and poems are included within this work which was frequently marked on scrolls and placed in the tomb of the recently dead, or partially inscribed upon the mummy case of the dead and dying. Sections of this artifact are to be found on Ethiopian and Egyptian papyri in the British Museum. E. A. Wallis-Budge, writing about the strangeness of these archives, remarks upon the occurrence there of the rotas palindrome, in reverse series beginning with sator, and judges that part of the palindrome's power comes from the fact that it is a form of language which cannot be translated. (Obviously, the Latin palindrome would have been added to The Book of the Dead by a later hand, probably a medieval archivist.) Still other palindromes from Greek magical papyri, such as the incantation "ablanathanalba," he also reports as being supreme translation problems (Wallis-Budge, 1930).

Karl Preisendanz writing in the Real-Encyclopädie, suspects that the palindrome is an archaic verse form which manifests itself as a supernatural use of language, and part of its power seems to come from its obscurity and indefinite meaning. Remarking on palindromes recorded in Greek and Latin anthologies, which themselves are taken from various magical papyri which regress with time into prehistory, he believes that through the speaking or writing of such utterances language became a vox magica in the ancient childhood of civilization, a

magical voice which could banish and magically annul the demonic powers which at that time could be working against the speaker. He cites the appearance of a Greek palindrome upon a magical papyrus which occurs within a circle formed by the mythic Uroboros, the serpent which swallows its tail, and he thus points out a symbolic continuity between the palindrome verse, the Uroboros, and the powers of the Egyptian sun-gods whose orbits these can be seen to symbolically represent. Once again, the recurrent formula of the palindrome can be interpreted as an evocation, through language, of the interconnectedness of things brought about by a deity. And it is the structural significance of the palindrome which is able to evoke that which is otherwise ineffable, not its grammatical content (Preisendanz, 1949).

The ancient poets of the palindrome have apparently allowed obscurity into their language in order to make manifest there a more vital and fundamental presence. Although the prehistory of the recurrent verse is, by definition, unavailable for confirmation of the nature of this presence, more than enough of the palindrome's fragmented past has now been restored to allow glimpses of the dimmed yet unmistakable contours which have gone before it into that forgotten and inaccessible dream time. The palindrome's history shows the lineaments of an occult use of language: instead of bearing a significance derived from verbal and nominative formations which take a thought from one point to another, the palindrome creates expression by structurally, although obscurely, constituting a sense of infinity.

Because language is retrospective, philologists may imagine a time in which our ancestors saw the attributes of their gods face to face and learned to summon mythic powers with their rude utterances. Through the desire for memory and the endurance of song, we now stand in observance of their words and the thoughts which their primordial use of language signified. The rough fragments of human expression passed through our ancestors and studied by the linguist are of a second order to the designed use of the palindrome, for it approaches a meaning found in no spoken idiom. The occult use of expression represented by it recognizes language as a force and a means of ascendancy over the objects of the material world, a power to manifest which can formally itself with the design of creation through the groupings of its letters and words. The archaic and mystical use of the palindrome is a language relic which denies the one-to-one correspondence between words and the objects and events of the real world, while its contexts insist on a much more encompassing reference. And although the archaic mood of the palindrome may have been transformed with history into mere wordplay, as we shall see, in that later wordplay there is also the creative moment and the will to bring together the elements of language.

Hence, the early poetics of the palindrome has a certain light to shine on the entire history of poetic behaviour. Poetry has always been a means of evocation through language, whether that evocation be a chant to the Trimurti from the banks of the Ganges, a hymn to Olympia by the epic bard, or the yearning wonder of the modern poet. However, the sensitivities of a poet are also capable of feeling that the accumula-

tive effect of language and poetics upon the vast spread of history and the imagination of mankind has only been so many lines shored up against a universe of silence. The void is overbearing and insufferable: it is within human nature, if there be such a thing, to turn away from the silence and to find within the world a confirmation of meaning and value for the private life. There is comfort and even ecstasy in the thought that the material world is pervaded by a homogeneous process, or will, and there is consolation in drawing it all together. On the broadest scale, the history of man has shown that we must make poetry, otherwise there can be only catatonia and the void. The eternal task of the poet is to make something with words, and it is no small wonder that what the ancient palindromist fashioned out of language has been given a magical significance by his auditors.

The lyric combination of symmetry and intelligibility bestows on the palindromic verse an intelligence of its own, as if it had been within the destiny of its language from the beginning. It also brings to mind the shape and numinous presence of what is referred to as the "other," whose mystic attendance can be sensed in a verse form that is working to free itself from its own native language, as if words could drift upwards towards their own self-expression and consciousness. The poetics of the palindrome, then, carries its own special aura as a language capable of signifying that which is inexpressible otherwise, and by this meets a human need.

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