

PROCEEDINGS
OF THE
CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN
SOCIETY

(INCORPORATING THE CAMBS & HUNTS
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY)



VOLUME LXXII

for 1982 and 1983

IMRAY LAURIE NORIE AND WILSON

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AN ANCIENT CHRISTIAN WORD-SQUARE AT GREAT GIDDING

DAVID SHERLOCK

Fixed to the south wall of St Michael's parish church is an example of the famous Latin word-square that has intrigued scholars for centuries. This example was first published just over a century ago but there has never been a satisfactory explanation of its significance or how it got there. As possibly the first known example of the square in England since the Anglo-Saxon period it deserves to be better known. There are considerable problems in translating and interpreting the word-square which have led to a huge literature on the subject. W. O. Moeller, who believed the origin of the square lay in ancient Mithraic religion, has over two hundred items in his bibliography; others more recent are to be found in a long footnote by R.S.O. Tomlin.¹ So it is with some trepidation that the following general remarks are added to the literature before the Great Gidding example is studied.

The word-square is a perfect palindrome, reading the same horizontally and vertically, and occurs in two forms:

ROTAS	SATOR
OPERA	AREPO
TENET	TENET
AREPO	OPERA
SATOR	ROTAS
(Form 1)	(Form 2)

The most literal translation (using the word-order in Form 2) makes *Arepo* a proper name and *opera* ablative singular, and reads: 'The sower, Arepo, holds with effort (*or* care) the wheels.' It is difficult to make sense of this since Arepo is not a name that is otherwise known and there is no apparent connection between sowing and holding wheels. It may be that the square was simply invented by someone with an interest in palindromes² and has no more significance than the famous English anachronistic palindrome 'Able was I ere I saw Elba'. Nevertheless, the square acquired a magical, if not mystical, meaning and certainly by the fourth century A.D. it had a specifically Christian significance which survived into the middle ages when it came to be used as a charm. There are numerous different interpretations, including those that give the letters Hebrew and Greek equivalents, numerical values and other secret significances, which can be found cited in the work by Moeller already referred to. Of the Christian interpretations two may be mentioned here in passing if only because they are attractive: they are both in verse. One is an anagram that can be made of the letters to read: *Petro et reo patet rosa Sarona*; 'The rose of Sharon (i.e. Christ, as later understood in the *Song of Solomon*) lies open for Peter, guilty though he be'. The other keeps the order of the letters but makes new words: *Sat orare poten et opera rotas?* 'Are you able to pray enough and to recite the office?' a question appropriate enough in view of the present position of the square in Great Gidding church near the parson's stall!

The most famous Christian interpretation of the word-square was discovered by three scholars working independently in the 1920s. They found that the 25 letters could be rearranged to form *Pater Noster* twice in the shape of a cross centred on the single letter N with two As and two Os left over:

	P	
	A	
A	T	O
	E	
	R	
PATERNOSTER		
	O	
	S	
A	T	O
	E	
	R	

This extraordinary discovery - including the first two words in Latin of the Lord's Prayer arranged in a definitely Christian shape with *alpha* and *omega* (albeit in Latin rather than Greek) thrown in - might have established beyond question the Christian significance of the word-square. Unfortunately there are difficulties. The three earliest examples of the square are first-century: one is from Conimbriga (Portugal) and two are from Pompeii which was destroyed by Vesuvius in A.D. 79. It is doubtful whether there were Christians at Pompeii as early as that. A version of the Lord's Prayer could however have travelled by word of mouth, and St Matthew's gospel, where *Pater Noster* occurs, could have been written some twenty years before the eruption of Vesuvius. The *Book of the Revelation*, where the saying 'I am *alpha* and *omega*' is to be found was probably written by about A.D. 69, only a decade before Vesuvius.³ It is safest to assume that the word-square had a pre-Christian origin and was only later adopted by Christians who discovered its linguistic capabilities for their own purposes. It is significant that the earliest and doubtfully Christian examples of the square occur in form 1, while the definitely Christian examples from the fourth century onwards occur in form 2. Perhaps the similarity between *Sator* and *Salvator* (Greek, Σωτήρ), Saviour, influenced this reversal of the word order.

The Great Gidding word-square (Fig. 1) is carved on an octagonal oak board about 8 inches across and ¼ inch thick. It is slightly damaged by the nail in the centre which fixes it to the chancel wall and by two holes near the bottom from an earlier fixing. The word-square is peculiar in that there are two Is where there should be Es in the second and third lines. The bar half-way up the Is is familiar in 17th century lettering as indeed is the backward N in the centre. The square is especially interesting because of the date 1614 above and the letters E R either side. These cannot stand for E...R (ex) or R (egina) in 1614 because the King then was James I (1603-1625) and his wife was Anne. Research in the Huntingdon Record Office has failed to find anyone or any couple with those initials connected with the date 1614 among the registers of baptisms, marriages and deaths, the churchwardens or the incumbents; nor was there anyone with those initials amongst Nicholas Ferrar's community at Little Gidding. Ferrar himself was at Padua University in 1614 and might have seen the word-square on his European travels but he did not move to Little Gidding until 1625.⁴ The only clue may be in the name Rockingham, the ancestral home of the Watson family which had bought the manor and church of Great Gidding at the Dissolution. There were Watsons living at Great Gidding in the early 17th century. Edward Watson was knighted in 1603 and died at Rockingham in 1616, but the Watsons would not have styled themselves 'Rockingham' until Lewes Watson was created first baron Rockingham in 1644, or Lewes, the third baron who was born in 1655, was created first earl of Rockingham in 1689.⁵

Local tradition says the word-square was made from the former rood screen and was fixed to the chancel wall when the screen was demolished. The date 1614 which is certainly consistent with the Jacobean style of the lettering is however very unlikely to have been carved to mark this event (if there ever was such a screen) coming as it does in a period when iconoclasm was dormant, that is, between the main sixteenth-century Protestant fervour and that of the Cromwellians. The two holes near the bottom of the square certainly mark an earlier method of fixing, but this presumably relates to the earliest known reference to the square which is in a popular periodical *Leisure Hour* for 1881 (London, p.382) where it is described as nailed on the door of a pew in the north aisle. This was one of 'several large square pews in different parts of the church which had to come down and make room for open seats' when the church was restored in 1870 and was presumably an old family pew, the name of which now remains a lost clue for the initials E R. By 1905 the square had been refixed 'on an oak seat' where it was observed by the local archaeological society.⁶

The Jacobean period was a superstitious one and, given the extraordinary interpretations of the square that existed elsewhere, it is not surprising to find one put up in a parish church.⁷ What is surprising concerns its date: that on the one hand it is too early to have been copied by someone who had seen it while travelling abroad on the 'grand tour', and on the other hand its only antecedents in England are over five centuries earlier. Could the Great Gidding word-square be a copy (imperfect in the central N and two Is) of a much earlier example done by someone who found it in 1614 and added his or her initials?

The two earliest examples of the word-square from England are Roman but were discovered long after 1614. They both date to about the second century. One was found at *Corinium* (Cirencester) in 1868 on a fragment of wall-plaster and the other was found at *Mamucium* (Manchester) in 1978 on a sherd of pottery.⁸ Both these examples are written in form 1 and are most unlikely to be Christian by then, but at Ashton and Water Newton,⁹ only seven and nine miles away from Great Gidding there is strong

evidence for the presence of Christianity in the Roman period at a time when the square (in form 2, as at Great Gidding) had certainly been adopted by Christians living elsewhere in the Roman world. The Great Gidding square could conceivably be a Jacobean copy of a lost Roman Christian example.

Against this hypothesis it has already been said that the word-square was widely known in Europe in the middle ages though not apparently in England after the Anglo-Saxon period.¹⁰ Oundle, only eight miles from Great Gidding, was a place of learning where the word-square might have been found.¹¹ Perhaps the Great Gidding square was a copy of one from there. The argument for a Roman original rests on the actual existence of two such examples in England, but in form 1; that for a medieval original rests on manuscript examples in form 2 found mainly abroad. Until 'E R' can be identified or other examples in England are found, a medieval original is the stronger possibility.

NOTES

1. See W.O. Moeller, *The Mithraic Origins and Meanings of the Rotas-Sator Square* Leiden 1973; M.W.C. Hassall and R.S.O. Tomlin, 'Roman Britain in 1978', *Britannia* X, 1979, p. 353, n. 70. I am grateful to Dr. Tomlin for commenting on my article.
2. A second-century A.D. example of the word-square has the beginning of another famous palindrome *Roma tibi subito motibus ibit amor* inscribed above it (Moeller *op. cit.*).
3. On early dating of the New Testament see John A.T. Robinson, *Can we trust the New Testament?* Mowbray 1977, ch.4. St Luke's version of the prayer differs from Matthew's in the omission of *Noster* (see *Matthew* vi, 9; *Luke* xi, 2).
4. See A.L. Maycock, *Nicholas Ferrar of Little Gidding* S.P.C.K., 1938.
5. For Great Gidding and the Watsons see *V. C. H.* III, pp.49 - 50 and C. Wise, *Rockingham Castle and the Watsons*, 1891.
6. Summer excursion May 1905, *Trans. Cambs. and Hunts. Arch. Soc.* II, 1908, p. 242. "On the walls of the chancel are 6 large shields carved with the arms of the Watson family of Rockingham; and on an oak seat is a well-known acrostic between the letters E R and the date 1614."
7. There is another example of the square in a late seventeenth-century hand, probably the parson's, in Earls Colne parish registers (Essex R.O.D/P209/1/4). The same hand has added an obscure and unrelated Latin saw and clearly belongs to a man with an antiquarian bent. I am grateful to Miss Nancy Briggs for advice on the handwriting. Another palindrome dating from the Stuart period is to be found on the font cover in Worlingworth Church (Suffolk): NIΨON ANOMHMA MH MONAN OΨIN.
8. See Donald Atkinson, 'The Cirencester Word-square', *Trans. Bristol and Glos. Arch. Soc.* LXXVI, pp.21-34; Tomlin, *op. cit.* in note 1.
9. For the Ashton lead tank with chi-rho monogramme see *Durobrivae* V, 1977, p.10. See K.S. Painter, *The Water Newton Early Christian Silver*, British Museum 1977.
10. See G. Storms, *Anglo-Saxon Magic*, The Hague, 1948, pp. 281-2, no. 43 (Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, MS 41), where it is given as a charm for childbirth. In William Bottrell's *Traditions and Hearthsides Stories of West Cornwall* (Penzance 1870, p. 116) it is recorded used as a charm for the 'ill-wished, spell-bound or otherwise ailing person'.
11. See Venerable Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica* V, 19, where he refers to the death of St Wilfrid in 709 in his own monastery in the district of Oundle while Abbot Cuthbald was ruling over it ('...in monasterio suo, quod habebat in prouincia Undalum sub regimine Cudbaldi abbatis...').