Notam superponere studui: the art of using symbols (rather than words) to annotated text

by Evina Steinova

In the course of the last four years (September 2011 – September 2015), I carried out a Ph.D. project at Huygens ING, an institute of the Dutch Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences, as a part of the NWO VIDI project Marginal Scholarship: the Practice of Learning in the Early Middle Ages (c. 800 – c. 1000). Under the supervision of Mariken Teeuwen and with Irene van Renswoude as my post-doc colleague, I examined the practice of using graphic signs (rather than words and textual notes) in the annotation of early medieval Latin manuscripts. Early medieval readers may have used, for example, a nota sign (fig. 1) to mark a passage that interested them in order to commit it to their memory.

Overall, I was able to identify and describe almost sixty different graphic symbols that were in use in Antiquity and the early Middle Ages or which were described in key texts devoted to the art of sign use. In many early medieval books, symbols – not textual notes, images or diagrams – formed the most substantial part of marginalia, items added in the margins of the book. In fact, one of the findings of my research was that in the ninth century, an era called after the ruling dynasty of the times as the Carolingian period, the use of marginal signs was so common that they can be encountered in the majority of manuscripts as a kind of characteristic ‘background hum’.

There are not too many and not too elaborate, but they are consistently present, and they always have the same graphic forms and functions, irrespectively of whether we are looking at a book annotated in Carolingian Italy, Germany or France or whether it was produced at the beginning or the end of the ninth century.

The presence of a single characteristic pattern in manuscripts from the Carolingian period indicates that certain marginal symbols belonged to the basic toolkit of contemporary book users, whether they were the copyists who produced manuscripts, correctors who were responsible for fishing out
errors and omissions from the finished text, or readers, who were the main users of manuscript texts. Although we, too, sometimes use symbols to annotate our books and papers (just think of the marks that we use to correct students’ papers or to proofread), we do it far less frequently and consistently than the early medieval readers. We observe no characteristic pattern of signs that would allow us some day to say which books were read in the 21st century.

Importantly, some of the books from the Carolingian period deviate from the standard pattern. They, for example, contain far too many signs or far too little signs or they contain symbols that are very rare and were used for specific purposes. This deviance can be used as an indicator to identify books that were used in particular context, for example books that once belonged to scholars or books that sparked controversy and had to be ‘sanitized’ (more on the ‘sanitization’ of books in Irene’s contribution). The symbol of obelus, which looks like a modern division sign (÷), for example, signalized that a certain passage contained problematic material – maybe because it contradicted the established Christian doctrine or because it looked like a secondary addition to the text (fig 2).

Moreover, not all signs that we found in the margins of early medieval books were invented and employed by readers from the Carolingian empire (which covered most of the Western Europe in the ninth century and parts of southern Europe as well). Some signs were typical for book users from other areas that had their own intellectual traditions and renown, such as the Greek Byzantine empire (in today’s Turkey and Balkans), or the British Isles. Even in the Carolingian empire, there were differences between book users from various regions and communities. Because it is possible to identify the pattern of sign use characteristic for various places (and periods, it should be added), it is also possible to discern those early medieval books that were annotated by foreign users, even though they were produced elsewhere.

These alien patterns reveal the presence of travelling scholars and visiting schoolmasters, books that changed hands and were taken far from the place where they were produced, and in more general terms the flow of knowledge between various regions and intellectual centers (as you will know from Mariken’s contribution, monasteries were then the most important institutions producing and possessing books as well as providing instruction and serving as working grounds for scholars and scientists). For example, Carolingian readers regularly used a sign known as require (Latin for ‘query, look up’), which has the form of letter r, to mark those passages that needed checking against a different copy of the same text because there was something amiss. Their colleagues from Ireland, however, preferred to mark faulty passages in the text by a Greek letter zeta, which looks like our modern letter z (fig. 3). The presence of the latter sign in a book that was copied in Carolingian script and kept in a library of a monastery in Carolingian territory sends us a clear signal: here is a traveling Irishman!
Irish scholars are perhaps the most interesting group of foreign intellectuals that were moving across the Carolingian empire. They were famous for their learning as well as for their vagrant lifestyle that took them far away from their homeland. In their journeys, they made use of a network of institutions that spread from Ireland to Rome, many of them Carolingian monasteries and cathedral schools serving as centers of learning and book-production, where they could stay for days, months or years before they ‘hopped’ to another place. We know of them because their names sometimes appear in local documents or because they left behind notices in Old Irish and sometimes copied books in their characteristic spiky script. But in other cases, the only trace of their presence are marginal signs entered in Carolingian books that show an Irishman busy at work in one of the Carolingian monasteries, a scholar that would otherwise entirely escape our radar. That is the case with a mysterious ‘Celtic annotator’ (as he was dubbed by modern scholars), who visited the monastery of St. Emmeram in Regensburg (fig. 4) around 850 and left behind a rich set of marginal symbols in one of the manuscripts from this abbey (fig. 5). The pattern of signs in this manuscript is so different from what we see in other manuscripts from the same center that it is clear that he was trained in Irish environment and moreover that he was not just a casual reader or a student but a scholar. Who was he, where did he come from, and where did he go after he left Regensburg? Because we now have his profile, it will be possible to spot him in other manuscripts and uncover more of his movements (and thus also bits of the network in which he participated).

Fig. 3: Two different symbols, the same purpose. Carolingian correctors used an r-shaped symbol to mark errors in the text (left) while their Irish counterparts employed rather a z-shaped sign (right). The two signs, thus, serve as a good indicator of Carolingian or Irish involvement in the manuscript (source: manuscripts Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 5508, fol. 20v and St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Ms. 48, p. 8).

Fig. 4: The abbey of St. Emmeram in Regensburg today.
There are many other uses that we, modern scholars, can have for the early medieval marginal symbols – from identifying intellectual and societal trends that could be otherwise hard to detect to tracking the activities of great thinkers of the times, whose specific mode of sign use can be reconstructed. The results of my Ph.D. research were presented in a dissertation, which was defended in March 2016 at Utrecht University and in several articles published in top academic journals and edited volumes. I also contributed to our project database (described in a separate article) by entering observations about marginalia in more than 150 early medieval manuscripts from Bavaria, which provided the main data set for my Ph.D. research. My texts inspired by the Marginal Scholarship project appeared on several research and popularizing blogs.

My research was first of its kind, but I hope further studies from other scholars will follow so that we can map the early medieval sign use with more precision and enhance our understanding of early medieval intellectual life and knowledge culture.

Photo on the top: A snapshot of a technical list of marginal symbols from the ninth century. Such lists are transmitted in several early medieval compendia and may have served as a guidebook for those, who wanted to know what individual symbols meant (source: manuscript Zofingen, Stadtbibliothek, Pa 32, fol. 12r).

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