

**Ildar Garipzanov, *Graphic Signs of Authority in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, 300–900*, Oxford (Oxford University Press) 2018, XXVI–377 p., num. fig., charts, diagr. (Oxford Studies in Medieval European History), ISBN 978-0-19-881501-3, GBP 75,00.**

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Professor Garipzanov discussed monograms in chapter 4 of his monograph on »The Symbolic Language of Authority in the Carolingian World« (2008). In this book he offers a comprehensive »synthetic study« which explores monograms on inscriptions, coins, weights, bricks, carved capitals, chancel screens, mosaics, ivory diptychs, spoons, belt buckles, rings and manuscript initials and lettering. He treats both Latin and Greek material, ranging from Carthage to Constantinople, Spain to Syria, and including grave goods in Ukraine, and he provides a large number of black and white illustrations of the material which he covers. In addition to monograms he frequently discusses illustrations of the cross which do not include any lettering.

The book opens with Late Antique views of graphic signs, quoting Augustine's treatment of the sign of the cross »by which every Christian act is described« at the end of Book II of the »De Doctrina Christiana« and a letter of Symmachus where he says that his personal monogram was to be understood, but not read. With other passages from Lactantius, Paul the Silentiary and a magical manual from Greek-Roman Egypt these texts show that graphic signs could »encapsulate« abstract ideas or transcendent powers, and that they were different from writing. The book depends on these two propositions.

In his introduction Garipzanov gives a brief account of recent work on graphicacy and visualcy, though he does not use the work of Sybille Krämer. He believes that graphic signs have the power to rapidly invoke nonvisual information from the long-term memory, and also to provoke emotional responses from their viewers. These signs also represented and communicated transcendent and secular authority, and Garipzanov suggests that they were »as powerful as Byzantine icons in the post-iconoclastic era« (p. 11). He has a very brief discussion of the meaning of *indicium* and the Roman sense of *auctoritas*. He then offers a historical account of the origin of Christian graphic signs, the use of Christograms and the sign of the cross, the epigraphic and numismatic use of monograms in Late Antiquity, 6<sup>th</sup> century Byzantium and pre-Carolingian and Carolingian Europe.

I am not clear why he stops his account here. There are excellent accounts of the use of the Chi-Rho and tau-rho in Christian inscriptions, of Latin acclamatory monograms, of monograms on rings and fibulae, of Latin acrostic poems and of Carolingian imperial monograms ending with a brief account of Hrabanus Maurus's acrostic poems. The book constantly tries to offer a cultural contextualisation of particular graphic signs. Both the Chi-Rho and the sign of the cross were apotropaic, and the apotropaic function of monograms is frequently stressed (p. 20, 44, 47, 53, 54, 56, 61, 65, 81, 82, 99, 100, 101, 216, 221, 225, 234). But they are



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also seen as cognitive mechanisms and »visual keys to the transcendent sphere« (p. 21). Some of them invited the beholder to engage in visual contemplation. For Garipzanov, monogrammatic devices are »the third mode of visual representation distinct from literary inscriptions and figural imagery« (p. 159).

Throughout the book Garipzanov shares difficulties of interpretation with his readers, noting monograms which have not been deciphered, asking whether there is a difference between Christian and so-called Gnostic usage of graphic signs, or whether the Chi-Rho is Christian or imperial, or how to interpret the different forms of the sign of the cross. He gives plans to show just how early Byzantine monumental monograms were placed on both levels of the churches of Sergius and Bacchus and Hagia Sophia. There are detailed accounts of different shaped monograms on coins reverses and on Carolingian charters.

Garipzanov has to confront the problem that deciphering monograms was not always easy, whether on ivories or on coins. For those who could decipher them they can »increase social cohesion by establishing visual borders to outsiders« but when carved in Justinianic churches they are visual messages of imperial authority, in mosaics at Ravenna they »visualise the transcendent sources of episcopal authority«. In a Lombard cemetery strap ends with monograms »remained undecipherable visual signs of social prestige«, in the Carolingian period, he asserts that »the ability to create and decipher monograms began to be seen as an ennobling skill« and that their use »sacralised written Latin and transformed it into the sacred script adequate to represent, as well as to communicate with, the divine«. But were liturgical books and Gospel Books regarded as being written in a »sacred script«? Garipzanov adopts Kessler's ideas about the *Vere Dignum* monogram mimicking the transformation of bread and wine at the Eucharist.

Garipzanov discusses the frequent practice of enclosing one letter inside another and the use of monogrammatic lettering, reflecting »the growing belief among clerical intellectuals in, and wider appreciation of, the capabilities of monogrammatic and ›imagistic‹ lettering to capture the essence of divinity and cosmic order, and to communicate deeper symbolic meanings with visual forms« (p. 238–239). But scribes were not all »clerical intellectuals«: the use of monograms for quire signatures and explicits in Latin manuscripts seems to me to be a display of calligraphic virtuosity, rather than a contemplative device. Do the large X's with a small circle at the end of each arm in the explicits of a 7<sup>th</sup> century manuscript of Origen really depict magical characters, rather than very simple ornamentation? Does the circular form of the monogram in the Calendar of 354 really reflect ideas about the circular movement of the soul? Does its dedication monogram reveal itself as an attempt to present Valentinus »assimilated to the divine Word«? Must the letter I placed on N at the start of John's Gospel or E on T in a *Te Igitur* allude to the crucifixion? On p. 246 he claims that »the invention of the IN initial mirrors settings where the nature of divine personas and Christ in particular was brought back into theological debates«.

At times the argument is speculative: »must have been« (p. 60), »might have had« (p. 62), »might have been« (p. 65, 66, 68), »might have encouraged« (p. 70), »might be« (p. 97), »might have been seen« (p. 120), »might have carried« (p. 129), »might have been« (p. 135), »may have been« (p. 163, 188), »must have been« (p. 207), »must have referred« (p. 212), »must have contributed« (p. 271). The scribe Adallandus of



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Weißenburg »was probably cognisant of connections drawn between Charlemagne and King Solomon in contemporary political culture« (p. 284).

Garipzanov quotes the remarkable short treatise »De inventione litterarum« which includes different alphabets and monograms and describes monograms as a combination of letters in one character. He does not use the brief text »De Monogramma« on the number of the beast which sees the monogram as a shape, a name and a number *Ideo ista nota in monogramma electa est, ut et numero et nomini satisfaciatur, numero qualitate, nomini figura* (Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina, 107: »Commentaria minora in Apocalypsin Johannis«, p. 150). He refers to a grammatical treatise on the symbolic meanings of the strokes of letters which is not just in a Bern manuscript but also in Leiden BPL 135, Karlsruhe Aug CXII, BN Lat 13025 and BN Lat 1750.

Manuscripts which could have been mentioned in the Carolingian section are the collection of grammatical texts in Bern 207 from Fleury, which has a wide range of alphabets, two poems of Porphyrius and several monogram initials including monograms for *NOMen*, *PROnomen*, *INTERiectio*, and an O enclosing S and L for *Sol*. These monograms seem to be purely decorative, and not related to interpreting the text. Berlin Theol Lat Fol 3 is a Gospel Book made for Lothar in his court school which has distinctive monograms. There are monograms for Peter and Paul in the late 9<sup>th</sup> century Prudentius manuscript Berlin Hamilton 542, cross monograms in BN Lat 111 f 24r, the monograms *PAX LEX REX LUX* in Paris Mazarine 1707, two monograms on the first leaf of Einsiedeln 157. Nor is there any mention of the monograms in manuscripts linked to Archbishop Hincmar.

There was no courtly scriptorium at Weissenberg (p. 282) and the Cologne manuscript of canons Dombibliothek 213 was not copied at Cologne (p. 257).

There are occasional infelicities of language: »sign of cross« (p. 23). »This monogrammatic practice was also adaptive to changes in fashion (p. 151). »In the very same capacity, monograms were also appropriated by the newly established Carolingian dynasty to project its royal authority« (p. 255). Visualise is always used to mean to make visible, though it can also mean to form an image of.

Not every reader will share Garipzanov's belief in a monogrammatic culture, or in all of the powers he attributes to monograms, but he has assembled a very great deal of material, and his tenacity in striving to understand it in all of its complexity is a considerable achievement.



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