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CHARACTERS AND MAGIC SIGNS IN THE PICATRIX AND OTHER MEDIEVAL MAGIC TEXTS

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Abstract: The word „characters” covers a number of different phenomena in the Middle Ages. It might refer to a list of incomprehensible signs and astrological symbols inscribed in a talismanic sigil, to a series of Latin letters used for magical purposes, and also to a written form of verbal incantation, a written charm. Characters were often used in the field of talismanic or celestial magic in order to name spiritual beings. The paper reviews the use of characters in various medieval sources: textual amulets, necromantic manuals, texts on talismanic magic and the most famous medieval magical summary, the Picatrix.

Keywords: Ars Notoria, Augustine, character, Floron, Isidore of Seville, Liber runarum, magic, Middle Ages, Picatrix, Thābit ibn Qurra, William of Auvergne.

To give a general overview on the medieval history of characters does not seem a hard task. The structure of such a summary would be fairly simple: first, on the basis of medieval sources, one has to define what is a character, and what it is not, second, it is useful to summarize the opinions of late antique and medieval intellectuals on the use of characters, and last, one should take a look at the very sources (magical and other) that used characters in the Middle Ages. When realizing this project however, one is faced with problems in virtually every stage of the presentation. First of all, it is not clear how we can define what are the characters, and how we can differentiate between them and *figurae*, *formae*, *annuli*, etc. Second, it is more or less clear what the theologians’ problem with the characters was, but there are characters that do not fall in the criticized category, and there are non-characters that do fall in it. And third, reading the theologians’ critique, we would expect characters to occur everywhere in the magical sources, but what we ultimately see is that their appearance is quite sporadic, and their role is less than central.

Let us start with a definition. The word character appears in the Middle Ages in various contexts. Most of all it is spelled in plural as *characteres*, but *karacter* and *carecter* also occur in medieval Latin and English texts.¹ We can

¹ Voigts 1989; Grévin-Véronèse, 2004.

define the characters as "incomprehensible signs", or as "graphic signs with extra linguistic representation". These signs might represent planets, signs of the zodiac, alchemical symbols, mathematical notations, demon names, planetary spirits or angels, they are often used as inscriptions in amulets, but characters were also used for the purposes of stenography, that is, speed writing (the most famous medieval example of which are the Tironian notes), and also in ciphers, that is, secret writings. In order to avoid dealing with these latter characters, we try to narrow down our definition, and stick to the following one: "signs addressed to the celestial sphere or to various beings of the celestial sphere," or shortly, "signs addressed to spirits". In that case, however, we will see that even this restricted definition covers a few other words that are partly or fully interchangeable synonyms for the character. It is not so easy to define the character as opposed to, as something different from *figura*, *sigillum*, *imago*, *facies*, *forma*, *anulus*, *nota*, and even *candaria*.²

Let us see now what made the characters so special for the medieval intellectuals; what made the theologians condemn them repeatedly, in other words, let us see the medieval "theoretical literature" on the characters. In the Middle Ages, all history of condemnations start with Augustine, and indeed the bishop of Hippo was the first who provided a coherent theory of why characters should be condemned.³ (His fullest account on magic is to be found in Book II of the *De doctrina christiana*, and in *De civitate Dei*, VIII-X.) In Augustine's model, magic appears in the context of the theory of signs as an act of communication with the demonic powers. Thus, all superstitious practices, including divination and astrology, presuppose an implicit or explicit agreement with demons. This is valid even in the case where the operator – deceived by the demons – is not aware of the pact, because this pact is secured by the magical language, signs, and rituals applied by him. For a reader of Augustine, basically every instance of magic – however innocent it may seem – is ultimately associated with demons, and becomes consequently harmful. Now, the use of characters is part of the communication with demons, and is therefore to be condemned. There are conventional signs used by people, such as language, writing, music, that are useful, there are also other signs however, that are useless and demonic. Abbreviations, Tironian notes and ciphers belong to the first category, magical talismans to the second. Augustine's rejection of magic is closely related to his rejection of theurgy: he argues that rites and symbols (with which theurgians claim to approach the divine sphere) cannot be used to constrain any omnipo-

² See the fullest overview of characters in medieval magic texts: Grévin-Véronèse, 2004.

³ Markus 1994, Fanger 1999.

tent divinity. If there is any efficacy in these signs, that should be due to the demons.

In the early Middle Ages, there were not too many magic texts that could be rejected on these grounds. In early medieval magic and astrology, characters did not play a central role. Consequently, early medieval condemnations of magic, following sometimes word by word the famous paragraphs of Isidore of Seville, were not concerned with the problem of the characters. Hugh of Saint Victor – an otherwise important opponent of magic – for example did not even mention the word character. It was only in the 11th and 12th century, that the picture changed, when the Latin world was faced with the fact that Arabic culture owned a considerably higher and more developed science to the Western European one, and when translators from all over Europe peregrinated to Spain and Sicily to translate a huge amount of Greek, Roman and Arabic texts from the Arabic language (in two steps: from Arabic to a local language, and then from this local dialect to Latin). Due to the twelfth- and thirteenth-century impact of the transmission of Arabic magical and divinatory works, the condemnations became more differentiated, and the classifications more elaborated.⁴

This was partly because the Arabic tradition provided the West not only with various practices of magic but also with certain theoretical background. A comprehensive theory of magic, entitled *De radiis stellarum* (*On the Rays of the Stars*) and attributed to Al-Kindi (ca. 800–ca. 870), the famous Arabic philosopher of Baghdad,⁵ presents a world of universal harmony. In this text, the world functions according to rational norms: the celestial bodies (planets and constellations) regulate earthly events through the rays emanating from them. Since it is their influence that is responsible for the terrestrial variety of things, the magician who is familiar with the condition of the celestial harmony will have sufficient knowledge on the objects of the lower world. But he will know even more than that: a close reading of the celestial harmony reveals the past and the future too. Special chapters are consecrated to the prayers addressed to God, to the virtue (that is, the inner power) of words,⁶ and to magical figures, characters, and images. Nonetheless, this philosophical explanation does not go into detail regarding the actual practice of magic; the technical part is left to texts such as Thābit ibn Qurra's *De imaginibus*, the *Picatrix*, and other texts that will be treated below.

The emergence of these fairly elaborated magic texts – of Arabic origin – that did use characters, constrained the authors of the theoretical literature to

⁴ On the gradual “Positivization” of magic in the later Middle Ages, see Fanger 2005.

⁵ Al-Kindi's *De radiis* was published with an extensive and helpful introductory study by Marie-Thérèse d'Alverny and Françoise Hudry 1974.

⁶ On the power of words, see Fanger 1999.

react to the problem. Most of them clearly refused the use of characters, usually on Augustinian grounds. William of Auvergne, bishop of Paris, for example, while famously accepting certain forms of natural magic, was very critical regarding the magical operations which made use of the power of images, figures, and characters.⁷ Those, he argues, who attribute virtue to the images and try to expel scorpions with the image of a scorpion are mistaken. These methods belong to what he calls *magisterium imaginum*,⁸ and what we can also call image magic, talismanic magic, celestial magic.

Even more interesting is another classification of magic, the *Speculum astronomiae*.⁹ The *Speculum astronomiae* is an annotated bibliography guiding the medieval reader through the labyrinth of the suddenly increased quantity of astrological literature, and providing the modern historian with an excellent research tool for the identification of sources. The explicit intention of its author is to differentiate between the useful astrological works on the one hand, and necromantic books on images, inscriptions and characters, rings and sigils on the other. This latter category became associated with the first innocent one, as necromancers had borrowed certain astronomical observations in order to render themselves more credible: they only pretended to be concerned with astrology in order to disguise their necromancy. Elaborating this intellectual enterprise, in his famous eleventh chapter the author of the *Speculum* gives a detailed list of the titles and incipits of talismanic works of Arabic origin: he classifies them into abominable, detestable, and acceptable categories. The last, relatively innocent and licit category embraces only two texts, *De imaginibus* of Thābit ibn Qurra, and the *Opus imaginum* of Pseudo-Ptolemy. The reason for such a differentiation is that the images of the acceptable texts obtain their virtue solely from the celestial figures, while the abominable and detestable images use demonic influences too.

Taking a look at the texts listed under the abominable and the detestable categories (that is, taking a look at almost all the magical texts of the 13th century), we see that the word character is much less used in them than we would think on the basis of the theoretical literature. They are however, full of talismanic content, magical images, small statues, seals, numbers, combinations of letters, and strange circular and quadrangular figures that were to be engraved on rings, metals, and gems under well defined astrological circumstances.¹⁰ It seems that the word character was used in the condemnations as a general category, and the problem with them was that they were addressed to spiritual be-

⁷ William of Auvergne 1963, I, 67aB. See also Weill-Parot 2002, 175-213.

⁸ William of Auvergne 1963, II 2 76, 929bA-930bE.

⁹ Zambelli 1992.

¹⁰ Grévin-Véronèse 2002.

ings. As an historian of magic, Nicolas Weill-Parot calls it, characters were destinative in the sense that they referred to the names of or the communication with spirits, identified by the theologians as demons. It is in this sense, that characters are condemned by Arnaldus de Villanova in his *Letter on Necromancy*.¹¹ Arnaldus, the Catalan doctor, theologian, and alchemist, whose name was also often associated with necromancy, discusses the power of necromancers and the possibilities of invoking and constraining demons to act according to the will of the magician.¹² He arrives at the usual conclusion of the official theology: demons cannot be compelled in a natural way by a human being, primarily because the human mind – being attached to a mortal body – is of necessity inferior to the purely spiritual beings.¹³ Although certain monks are convinced that demons can be invoked in various ways, Villanova rejects their point, and argues in great detail as to why the power of gems, inscriptions, planets, artificial figures and characters cannot possess any special virtue with which one would be able to coerce spirits.

Examples from the theoretical literature could be still quoted, however, it is time to turn to the magic manuscripts themselves. Is it really true that characters are so omnipresent in the magic texts that medieval intellectuals had no other choice but intervene? Thanks to the thorough examination carried out by Benoît Grévin and Julien Véronèse, we can answer to this question.¹⁴ Let us start with the most famous texts. The *Picatrix* for example, the large book translated in the court of Alphonso the Wise in the 13th century, is well known as a medieval compilation of magic texts of all kind. As a large portion of the magic texts that can be found in it belong to the field of astral magic, or talismanic magic, we would expect meeting a wide variety of characters in it. However, and most surprisingly, the word character is not even mentioned in the text of the *Picatrix*.¹⁵ If we open now an illustrated version of it, we will see beautiful images, called *imago*, *forma* or *figura* in the text. These are the pictures of planets or decans, and are to be inscribed in various metals or stones, however, these are not really characters in the usual sense of the word (book 2, chapter 12). A short Krakow excerpt from the *Picatrix* also offers a list of such letters, that are more character-like. These are called signs of planets (*signa*, *sigilla*, or *figurae planetarum*) and serve for various magical aims: to expel

¹¹ Giralt 2005.

¹² On Villanova and his letter generally, see Thorndike 1923-1958, Paniagua 1994, Grmek 1958.

¹³ Grmek 1958.

¹⁴ Grévin-Véronèse 2002.

¹⁵ Pingree 1986.

flies and mice, to bless a place, and so on.¹⁶ Similar celestial letters proliferated in the Renaissance in such great diversity that Cornelius Agrippa felt obliged to offer a whole typology of them in his comprehensive handbook of magic.¹⁷

Similarly, in the famous necromantic handbook published by Richard Kieckhefer, the word character appears very rarely. We find it referring to the signs inscribed in the so-called mirror of Floron in order to facilitate the communication with the demons. This mirror should be prepared in the name of the spirit Floron according to detailed rituals, in which fumigations, clean clothes, and virgin boys are involved. If prepared properly, an armed knight sitting on a horse will appear in the mirror, and then the master might ask him about the past, the present, and the future.¹⁸ The mirror of Floron survived not only in Latin texts but also as objects, for example on a metal disc kept today in the Mathematical-Physical Salon in Dresden¹⁹ which confirms that such rituals were indeed followed.²⁰ Characters appear in other places in Kieckhefer's handbook as well, here, however, they are called *sigilla* (not to mean sigil, but used as the diminutive of *signum*, that is, a small sign). They belong to planetary spirits, and they are not supposed to be inscribed in metals or gems, but rather on paper.

We find curious characters in another magical text, the *Liber runarum*, where the names of planetary spirits are spelled in Nordic runes, but again, there are not called characters. The text gives detailed directions on how to inscribe the spirit names on the metals and stones attributed to every planet.²¹ To help those readers whose interest is not purely theoretical, the text ends with a concrete demonstration of the methods choosing the example of the planet Venus. If one wants to operate with the power of the planets, he (or she) has to inscribe the name of the appropriate angels on the proper metal, and then he is to invoke the angels and ask them for help to achieve the given aim – which is,

¹⁶ Ms Biblioteca Jagiellonska 610, f. 312v-316r; see also Pingree 1986, 63.

¹⁷ Agrippa 1992, 490-495: Chapter 39, "De characteribus et sigillis spirituum."

¹⁸ Kieckhefer 1997, 104-106 and 236-238: "Fac fieri speculum de puro calibe, ad mensuram palme unius in rotundo; habeatque manubrium ad tenendum, et sit illuminatum et lucidum ut ensis. Sitque factum in nomine Floron, et in circuitu istius peculi ex alia parte non lucida sint hec decim nomina, cum hiis decem characteribus descripta, et nomen spiritus predicti sit in medio scriptum." For a picture of the mirror, see *ibid.*, 363.

¹⁹ Láng 2008, 138.

²⁰ On the use of the Mirror of Floron for various purposes in the Middle Ages, see Delatte 1932, 44-46.

²¹ Lucentini 2001, 444-445: "Habitis nominibus spirituum planetarum, videndum est quomodo ipsa nomina metallis sive lapidibus planetis attributis insculpi debeant per figuras, ita quod nature figurarum sequantur se ad invicem sicut et signa et triplicitates."

obviously, winning the love of a person as usual in the case of Venus talismans.²²

Nor are the famous *notae*, the geometrical figures of the *Ars notoria* called characters. A set of diagrams of circular, triangular, and tree forms are assigned to each branch of learning. These *notae* not only serve to represent the links between the different elements of the text, but also function as visual aids for meditation, through which the operator is able to communicate with the celestial powers. This twofold operation corresponds to the double intentions of the *Ars notoria*: it promises to provide knowledge of all the liberal arts, while offering a means of communication with the spirits. That the use of these *notae* was not without problems is shown by the fact for example, that Thomas Aquinas condemned the *Ars notoria* for exactly because of the use of *verba ignota*, unknown words, and the suspicious *notae*.

Fortunately, there are also a few texts, where we do find the word character. Among these we can mention the *De imaginibus septem planetarum* attributed Belenus.²³ This short text indicates the hour in which the talisman should be prepared, as well as the materials of which it is to be made. The aims are the usual ones of image magic: to appear powerful in battle with the help of the talisman of Mars; to retain a woman's love with the talisman of Venus; to make someone appear abominable by the help of Saturn in a way that everybody considers him nasty, disgusting, and odious. What is a novelty here is that the name of the person on whom the benign or malign effect of the spirits should be exercised is to be written on the image. The text ends with a list of the *ymagines et caracteres planetarum*, consisting of an alphabet of magical signs most of which is crossed out and made unreadable by a later hand in the Vatican manuscript where this text survived.²⁴ This caution is not surprising; the characters are most powerful. As the text instructs, they play a rather crucial role in the functioning of the talismans, being the chief factors of constraining the spirits of the planets.

The use of characters could be analyzed in a number of further magic texts too, but it is time to come to a conclusion. The word character was used to

²² Lucentini 2001, 447: "Nunc restat dare exempla sculpturarum ex premissis, et ego non ponam nisi unum, scilicet de Venere, secundum quod poteris per quamlibet planetarum, sicut predictum est, operari si volueris. Et hoc est ut sculpas nomen angeli Lune et Veneris et nomen puelle sive mulieris in lamina stannea vel argentea, quod melius est, quibus scriptis sepeli laminam in loco ignis ut continue caleat, ita tamen ne calor ignis sculpturam destruat. Et dum hoc facis inuoca angelos sicut supra dictum est, et subinfer: 'Nunc cor talis N. igne mei amoris ita exuratis, sicut ab igne hec tabula inflamatur.' Sic sepcies inuocabis, et effectum tui operis, si bene operatus fueris, obtinebis."

²³ Láng 2008, 116-8.

²⁴ See the partial copy of Pal. lat. 1375 f. 270v in Láng 2008, 117.

cover a number of different meanings in the Middle Ages, it was used in cryptology, that is, secret writing, it was used in stenography, that is, speed writing, it was used in theology (the characters of Christ, for example), and even in heraldry. All this was not seen as a problem in the theological literature, which criticized characters only in their magical application. However, as we have seen, the word character is less frequently used in magic than we would expect, and a number of other words cover similar, or almost similar meanings: *sigillum*, *figura*, *forma*, *facies*, *candaria*, *signum*, *imago*, *nota*, *anulus*. The signs, or let us say characters named by these words are almost never used in the field of natural magic, they rather appear in talismanic magic (in other words, astral magic, or image magic), and they almost always refer to the names of spirits, angels, or demons, or facilitate the communication with them. Augustine was right.

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