

**PERRIN, MICHEL
JEAN-LOUIS
– *L'ICONOGRAPHIE DE
LA GLOIRE À LA SAINTE
CROIX DE RABAN MAUR.*
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Michel Perrin is assuredly the most prolific writer on the work of Hrabanus Maurus *In Honorem Sanctae Crucis*, composed in the 9th century¹. He is the author of the *Corpus Christianorum* volume, and he published several other texts, probably being responsible for a fresh look at the subject out of the German *milieu*². Until the beginning of the 20th century, Hrabanus was considered to be the *praeceptor germaniae* for powerful political reasons. However, subsequent early historiography did no better by describing his publication as lacking in originality.

Perrin's research reinforced the new interest in this work, sustained in a rigorous analysis of the texts, images and circumstances of production, showing Maurus to be an author capable of innovation and his work to be a matchless piece. Such a historiographical approach was long-needed because the work brings together 28 figured poems, their explanation in verse and in prose which requires, by its very nature, a comprehensive study. The poems are constructed within a framed square with additional verses interspersed among the text, also called *versus in texti*, as acrostics. Acrostics are an arrangement of letters, syllables, words or even sentences which when positioned sequentially form another text, extrinsic to the main one, here they are highlighted with the geometrical figures and images.

In the first chapter of the *L'iconographie de la Gloire à la sainte croix de Raban Maur*, Perrin gives a general survey of Hrabanus's life and career³ and his role at the centre

¹ Michel J. L. Perrin has published more than 20 texts on the subject that should be regarded as complementary to the reading of this work. Cf. Perrin (2009, 105-107). He was also responsible for 2 source editions: Raban Maur, *De laudibus sanctae crucis – Louanges de la Sainte Croix*, ed. by Michel J. L. Perrin, co-ed. by Berg-Trois Cailloux, Paris-Amiens, 1988 (Introduction, partial facsimile edition of the manuscript Amien 223, translation, notes and index); *Rabanus Maurus, In honorem sanctae crucis = Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis*, n°100 (129 pp. of introduction; 342 pp. of text and annex) + 100 A (32 covers with the reproduction of the *carmina figurata* of the manuscript Vaticanus Reginensis 124 and its transcription) + the concordance for the CLCLT, ed. by Michel J. L. Perrin, Turnhout, 1997.

² Along with the work of Michele Camillo Ferrari (1998); Bernard Guineau and Jean Vezin (1992, 1994); Lynda L. Coon (2010) and

Philippe Depreux [dir.] (2006). Among the most recent and/or relevant German literature on the subject we find: Kurt Holter (1973); Hans-Georg Müller (1973); Ulrich Ernst (1984, 1990, 1991, 2003, 2005); Spilling Herrad (1992) (Also Spilling 1996, 1980 and 1978); Franz J. Felten (2006); Hans-Jürgen Kotzur (2006); Michael Embach (2007).

For an almost complete acknowledgement of Hrabanus Maurus's bibliography, see Susana Bulido Del Barrio (2010).

³ Perrin (2009, 15-16).

⁴ Quoted through Perrin (2009, 17-18).

⁵ Perrin (2009, 18-19).

⁶ Cf. e.g. Thomas Noble (2009) or Ann Freeman (2003).

of the Carolingian court. In the second, Perrin addresses the conditions of redaction of *In honorem* very synthetically yet meticulously, emphasizing some of its most important aspects. By way of example, the fact that it was Alcuin who suggested the elaboration of such *libellus*, or the (almost certain) possibility of a first autograph manuscript, corrected and carried by Hrabanus's throughout his entire life.

A first copy was sent to his colleague and friend Hatto for correction and approval, raising some questions about his putative intervention in the work. However, Perrin stresses the fact that Hrabanus refers to it as *opus meum*, signs one of the poems and portrays himself in the last one. He also affirms that he made the work *mente et calamo* (in the exemplar dedicated to Otgar), and states that *confeci librum mente manumque simul*...⁴ (manuscript sent to Saint-Denis). All of this leads to his almost undeniable authorship for both the images and the text of the first copy, an idea of major importance for the critical study of authorship in the Middle Ages. Perrin discusses another central aspect of the *In honorem* composition: was it from its very beginning an *opus geminum*? That is, a work deliberately divided in two parts (first, poems and verse; second, prose explanations)? He presents some provisional conclusions in the sense that Hrabanus did in fact intend a double book, but the second part was written only a few months or years later, perhaps due to the conflicts that he experienced in Fulda⁵.

Perrin tries to account for the immediate success of this manuscript by providing an extensive list of the copies offered as gifts during Hrabanus's life. Following the work of Spilling he presents a possible correspondence between the currently known manuscripts and their possible recipients. Unfortunately, he does not discuss in depth which artistic characteristics might have raised such interest. He reflects, however, on the status that Hrabanus had enjoyed at his monastery, having had at his disposal the materials and human resources for the making of so many manuscripts, which is certainly symptomatic of its value.

In the third chapter Perrin contextualizes the iconoclastic controversy which crosses the Christian world in the eighth and ninth centuries to present Hrabanus's position on images. So, for Hrabanus, as Perrin puts it, the image goes from the visible to the invisible and only concerns the theological plan. It works as an appeal to the senses to conduct the individual to the eternal life. In this sense, as it has the value of a theological commentary, it is not pure representation; it is functional. And he quotes Boulnois by saying that during the Middle Ages the image does not seek to provoke aesthetical pleasure, but the knowledge of truth. Perrin bases his arguments on the text and shows familiarity with others of Hrabanus's works and epistles demonstrating a deep understanding of the spiritual perspective of the time. Hence he connects Hrabanus's view with Pope Adrian's position, someone who had a fundamental role in mediating these issues among the Carolingians⁶. However, a purely spiritual understanding of his visual poetry might contradict both the material investment in the work and its immediate success. Though very appropriate, a study that adheres to what the author might be claiming in his prefatory material, or to an established idea of the spiritual importance of the image during

the Middle Ages, can result in incomplete conclusions. Hrabanus takes the figural poetry to a new level by introducing images into the poems, and he does so within the controversy of images. His artistic boldness should be taken hand in hand with the subsequent use and distribution of the manuscript referred to *supra*, and with the interest that it raised. Such considerations might lead us to conclude that the importance of the work also depends on the defiant use of images, its ornamentation and other material aspects (e.g. good quality parchment, use of gold and purple) which surpass its theological value. Together they can reveal an acute recognition of the artistic or even the 'aesthetic' value of the manuscript.

The fourth chapter of *L'iconographie* presents precisely a summary of Hrabanus's creation within the visual / figural poetry genealogy, and the following pages are a unique study of the number symbolism employed in the work. Perrin shows how Hrabanus uses number as a philosophized and theologized subject and as raw material to construct the work. He proposes this arithmology as part of the structural development of the *In honorem*, not only associated with the Bible and religious signification⁷, but also benefiting from antique mathematical knowledge. Perrin counts the number of letters of each square / rectangle, the number of figures drawn, the type of the polygons and so on, eventually resulting in striking conclusions about a logical determination of the ensemble (with several internal links), divided in two major parts. Finally, he remarks that Hrabanus's intentions were not determined by esoteric interests; he created the poems with the conception of a geometric and numerical God⁸. It is only in the fifth chapter that Perrin's proposal of a theological cycle divided in two becomes clearer. He argues that the first part of the cycle concerns the period up to the Passion of Christ and the second, symmetrically, the times of the Church up to the celestial path⁹. In this sense, the 28 poems form a total *macro-poème*, where the sacred history of man and the world is enclosed in God's time. Perrin adds that the importance of the Apocalypse (through Bede's influence) clearly shows the eschatological vision of Hrabanus, meaning that this history is oriented towards the eternal life. If we take into account that the apocalyptic perspective somehow resumes the times of the Church, perhaps *In honorem* is expressing an anthropology and Christology which distances itself from Adoptionism. The Adoptionist controversy alongside that of the *Filioque* is especially heated during Hrabanus's lifetime. It is possible that he was subtly discussing these questions and assuming a personal position, as he probably was concerning the controversy of images¹⁰. Perrin very efficiently supports his arguments from the text and remarks that that is why the Cross plays a central role in the work.

The sixth chapter briefly reinforces some of the preceding conclusions underlining the fact that Hrabanus's *opus* has no parallel.

Then, as a second part of the book, we have a material description of *In honorem* and a reading guide that might have been helpful to know in advance. In the following pages Perrin presents the iconographical cycle and provides detailed interpretations about the poems. It is a very useful working tool, since he also transcribes and translates the *versus in texti* mingled with iconographical explanations for the

⁷ Hrabanus often uses patristic author's interpretation of number symbolism, like St. Augustin, St. Jerome or Isidor of Seville.

⁸ Perrin (2009, 40).

⁹ First part, poems 1 to 14 (B1 – B14); second part, poems 15 to 28 (B15 – B28). Cf. Perrin (2009, 43).

¹⁰ Perrin supports it with several passages from the poems. Cf. Perrin (2009, 45-48).

¹¹ (V) Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Reginensis 124, 9th century (Fulda, Germany); Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vaticano; Douai, Bibliothèque Municipale 340, 12th century (Amiens, France); (A) Amiens, Bibliothèque d'Amiens Métropole 223, 9th century (Fulda, Germany).

¹² Perrin (2009, 12).

¹³ Perrin (2009, 13).

figures and other material, naming Hrabanus's sources. The explanations are followed by a list of manuscripts, the literature most relevant to the theme (sources, specific bibliography and general bibliography) and a short glossary.

In what Perrin calls "Guide des Figures" he presents the reading instructions for the squared poems, so to say. Each poem is transcribed in a *quasi* manual way facilitating its reading. The images' contour is roughly outlined above the text to mark the difference between the main text and the text embedded in that one, and with arrows and numbers Perrin provides the proper reading order. The *versus in texti* or acrostics are transcribed and translated into French immediately after the poem. *L'iconographie de la Gloire à la saint croix de Raban Maur* finishes with a set of 39 colour plates, 2 from the Vaticana ms. Reginensis 124, 1 from the Douai ms. 340, and the rest from the Amiens ms. 223¹¹.

The utility of this amount of work by Perrin is unquestionable. The achievements of his research, summarized in this book and in some respects developed, equips us with relevant tools for the reading and interpretation of *In honorem* and we will no longer look at those puzzling poems in the same manner. However, in a manuscript that is constructed to be seen and read as a complete set and which relies so heavily on the decoding games and reading paths (simultaneously disturbed and reinforced by the images), key to its uniqueness, one is forced to admit that some perturbation emerges from such deconstruction.

To conclude, it is worth noting that *L'iconographie de la Gloire à la saint croix de Raban Maur* is the first volume of a collection, *Corpus du Rilma. Répertoire iconographique de la littérature du Moyen Âge*, directed by Christian Heck. Facing the contradiction between the richness and scientific potential of the considerable existing material and the various limitations of its actual availability, its main purpose is to provide several literary themes and iconographical cycles which remain unpublished or little known. That is why the authors were invited to write a docket of their research and present, to art historians in particular and medievalists in general, complete and coherent sequences of iconographical cycles. The collection has therefore the critical aim of showing that the image cycles are complex creations; that they do not develop themselves exclusively from the text (nor are they solely connected to it), but also exist as independent artistic inventions; and to prove that the iconographical cycles cover all fields of the knowledge and thinking of the Middle Ages¹².

It is no wonder that the work of Perrin on Hrabanus's *In honorem sanctae crucis*, receives the honour of being the first volume. Besides the quality and relevance of Michel Perrin's work, and as Christian Heck himself puts it: "La création de Raban Maur est exemplaire dans cette quête du *Profectum ex pictura si tardus ex scriptura*. Le lecteur qui n'est pas familier de cette oeuvre comprendra, dans les commentaires contenus dans ce pages, à quel point le *carmen figuratum* est un cas extrême de l'association du texte et de la représentation figurée, en une articulation absolue de la lettre et de la forme plastique, l'une se nourrissant de l'autre dans une réalisation géniale tout à l'honneur d'un immense savant au coeur de la Renaissance carolingienne."¹³ ●