



/Abstract/ Epigraphic inscriptions are very common in early medieval art and have been studied in an abundant bibliographic production since the last quarter of the twentieth century in research on text/image interactions in medieval artistic culture. Insofar as verse inscriptions were used everywhere in Carolingian epigraphic documentation, and insofar as they coexisted with many texts in prose, why did images always use metrics? What kind of links connected iconic construction and poetic composition? To propose answers to these questions, this paper explores some different approaches to epigraphic tituli on early medieval works of art. By limiting its scope to metrical texts, it highlights some salient features of this very rich epigraphic documentation without separating the form and meaning of the text from the material. The symbiosis of these three primordial elements actually allowed the creation of a kind of “Carolingian aesthetics” and gave efficiency to the interactions between texts and images.

/Keywords/ Medieval epigraphy, Medieval literature, Inscriptions, Visual studies, Poetry

Vincent Debiais

Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS)
vincent.debiais@univ-poitiers.fr

Carolingian Verse Inscriptions and Images

From Aesthetics to Efficiency

Vincent Debiais

Introduction

On one of the arches of the holy water bucket given to the cathedral of Milan by Bishop Gotofredo in 975, one can read the following verse¹/Fig. 1: “*Virgo fovet natum genitricem nutrit et ipse*”. It is placed above the image of the Virgin and Child, flanked by two angels, one holding a censer, the other a liturgical container of holy water – an iconographic echo of the object that is support of the image. The verse inscription points out the two characters, the Virgin Mary and Christ, in a complex and elliptical construction. All the arches of the bucket display a metric inscription placed above the representation of the four evangelists writing the first words of their gospel² in an open book:

*“Celsa petens aquile vultum gerit astra Iohannes.
Christi dicta premit Marcus sub fronte leonis.
Ora gerens hominis Matheus terrestria narrat.
Ore bovis Lucas divinum dogma remugit”.*

The text identifying the work of art and its donor on the upper part of the object consists also of a metric inscription, an elegiac distich³:

*“Vates Ambrosi Gotofredus dat tibi sancte
Vas veniente sacram spargendum cesare lympham”.*

In its content, metric, formula and relationship to the image, the inscription for the Virgin belongs to the Carolingian tradition of *titulus*, i.e. a short, metric and complex sequence accompanying images in manuscripts and, to a lesser extent, in the epigraphic

domain⁴. The practice of mixing figurative representation and alphabetical sequence within the same visual paradigm persisted and grew beyond Carolingian times; wall paintings, sculptures, mosaics and monumental images in general continued, sometimes exclusively, to use verses in order to enrich the meaning of representation; they did so by

- 1 On this object, see Paola Venturelli, “Situla di Gotofredo”, in *Tesori d’arte restaurati. Firenze (22 marzo–5 giugno 2001)*, catalogue of exhibition, Carlo Bertelli ed., Venice 2001, n. 13, pp. 118–123; *Eadem*, “La situla eburnea di Gotofredo del Duomo di Milano: segnalazione di quattro copie”, *Rivista dell’Osservatorio per le arti decorative in Italia*, III (2011), pp. 14–23 (http://www.unipa.it/oadi/rivista/oadi_3.pdf).
- 2 On Matthew’s book: *XPI GENER [ATIONIS]*; on Mark’s book: *VOX CLAMAT IN D [ESERTO]*; on John’s book: *IN PRINCIPIO ERAT VERBUM ET*; on Luke’s book: *FVIT IN DIEBV [S]*.
- 3 These inscriptions have been reproduced and edited by Paola Venturelli in the articles quoted in footnote 1.
- 4 The most complete study on the notion of *titulus* as a literary genre is the book by Arwed Arnulf, *Versus ad picturas. Studien zur Titulusdichtung als Quellengattung der Kunstgeschichte von der Antike bis zum Hochmittelalter*, Berlin 1997. In this fundamental study, the author proposes a large overview of the poetic production dealing with images from Late Antiquity to the end of the eleventh century, in order to show that this tradition has been received during the Middle Ages as a legacy coming from Pausanias, Paulinus of Nola, Prudentius etc... Such a linear view of the uses and form of the *titulus* might be nuanced by considering the changing specificities of poetics and poetic theories on the one hand, and representational issues on the other hand. The linear and cumulative approach to *tituli* could have been induced by the method chosen by the main bibliographical references dealing with this topic; they present huge catalogues of poems and rich compilations in chronological and geographical orders (Gustav Bernt, *Das lateinische Epigramm im Übergang von der Spätantike zum frühen Mittelalter*, München 1968; Julius von Schlosser, *Quellenbuch zur Kunstgeschichte des abendländischen Mittelalters*, Wien 1896). For a recent overview of this topic, see Vincent Debiais, “L’écriture dans l’image peinte romane. Questions de méthode et perspectives”, *Viator*, XL1 (2010), pp. 95–125.



1/Virgin with Child,
lustral bucket, Milan
cathedral, Treasury,
ca. 975

inventing new prosodic and graphic solutions or by reinterpreting models from Carolingian tradition⁵.

Epigraphic inscriptions are very common in early medieval art and have been studied in an abundant bibliographic production since the last quarter of the twentieth century in research on text/image interactions in medieval artistic culture⁶. The frequent use of metrics for these inscriptions has also been reported. A question still remains largely outstanding, however: Insofar as verse inscriptions were used everywhere in Carolingian epigraphic documentation, and insofar as they coexisted simultaneously with many texts in prose, why did images always use metrics? What kind of links existed between iconic construction and poetic composition?

In order to propose answers to these questions, this paper would try to explore some different approaches to epigraphic *tituli* on early medieval works of art. By limiting this paper to metrical texts, I would like to highlight some salient features of this very rich epigraphic documentation without separating the form and meaning of the text from the material. The symbiosis of these three primordial elements actually allowed the creation of a kind of “Carolingian aesthetics” and gave efficiency to the interactions between texts and images.

Medieval images and verses: some generalities and convergences

As a general statement, one could say that medieval images were designed and perceived in terms of similarity and dissimilarity and not on the principle of imitation or realism⁷. They shared with poetry the fact that they all were the result of an intellectual and formal development, a product engaging knowledge and specific *savoir-faire* in a *composition*.

During their first developments, “text and image” studies were based on two contradictory conceptions: the first, relying on medieval theory of images, recognized the higher authority and value of written sources *vis-à-vis* visual figuration; the second, considered writing in medieval images nothing more than a complement, a trivial addition introduced to render representations more understandable. Today, this dual position is being strongly questioned, fortunately⁸. To the first, one can object that images, in particular in Early Middle Ages, cannot usually be directly linked to a precise textual source that they presumably were illustrating, as if they had no other existence than in that kind of formal dependence

between textual sources and figurative and illustrating images; such a claim would be “no text, no image”. Variety in medieval figurative subjects, the place of ornamentation, the originality of motives and their combination, reveal clearly that medieval artists knew how to emancipate themselves from narrative shackles imposed by biblical or hagiographical texts⁹. Inscriptions, even when they were an exact or approximate quotation of a pre-existing text, were not designed to make links between this text and that image more obvious; rather, they reinterpreted and modified those links¹⁰.

To the second conception that establishes inscriptions as explanations of images, it may be objected that *tituli*, because of their poetic nature, tended to enrich the message of the image rather than make it more obvious¹¹. The access to meaning is not more immediate, simpler, nor less ambiguous through writing than through images. An inscription could be a label, a comment, a gloss, a reflection on the image,

5 Elisabeth Teviotdale, “Latin Verse Inscriptions in Anglo-Saxon Art”, *Gesta*, xxxv/2 (1996), pp. 99–110.

6 Among this very large bibliography, see *Texte et image. Actes du colloque international de Chantilly (13–15 octobre 1982)*, Paris 1984; *L’image. Fonctions et usages des images dans l’Occident médiéval. Actes du 6^e International workshop on Medieval Societies*, Erice, 17–23 octobre 1992, Jérôme Baschet ed., Paris 1996; *Testo e immagine nell’alto medioevo (15–21 avril 1993)*, Spoleto 1994; *Épigraphie et iconographie. Actes du colloque de Poitiers (1995)*, Robert Favreau ed., Poitiers 1996. More recently: Neil Stratford, “Verse Tituli and Romanesque Art”, in *Romanesque Art and Thought in the Twelfth Century: Essays in Honor of Walter Cahn*, Colum P. Hourihane ed., Princeton 2008, pp. 136–153; Stefano Riccioni, “L’Epiconografia: l’opera d’arte medievale come sintesi visiva di scrittura e immagine”, in *Medioevo: arte e storia. X^e Convegno internazionale di studi*, Milan 2009, pp. 465–480; Christian Heck, “Un nouveau statut de la parole? L’image légendée entre énoncé, commentaire, et parole émise”, in *Qu’est-ce que nommer? L’image légendée entre monde monastique et pensée scolastique*, Christian Heck ed., Turnhout 2010, pp. 7–28.

7 Among many others titles, I would like to give a special focus on an old but excellent book: Robert Javelet, *Image et ressemblance au XI^e siècle*, Paris 1967; More recently, see Herbert Kessler, “Speculum”, *Speculum*, lxxxvi/1 (2011), pp. 1–41; Jean-Claude Schmitt, “La culture de l’image”, *Annales. Histoire, sciences sociales*, l1/1 (1996), pp. 3–36.

8 On these discussions, see Norbert H. Ott, “Word and Image as a Field of Research: Sound Methodologies or just a Fashionable Trend? A Polemic from a European Perspective”, in *Visual Culture and the German Middle Ages*, New York 2005, pp. 15–33.

9 Charlotte Denoël, “Texte et image dans les Vies de saints à l’époque romane: le rôle des tituli et des légendes descriptives”, in *Qu’est-ce que nommer?* (n. 6), pp. 111–124.

10 On that topic, one can read what M. Schapiro wrote a long time ago about Moissac capitals: Meyer Schapiro, “The Romanesque Sculpture of Moissac”, *The Art Bulletin*, xiii/3 (1931), pp. 349–351 and xiii/4 (1931), pp. 464–531; on Moissac, see Ilene H. Forsyth, “Word-Play in the Cloister at Moissac”, in *Romanesque Art and Thought in the Twelfth Century* (n. 6), pp. 154–178.

11 Vincent Debais, “Crear con imágenes. Los ángeles de Aguilar de Campoo”, *Codex Aquilarensis*, xxviii (2013), pp. 117–132.



a legend (in the first meaning of Latin word *legenda*), but it is not by force a simplification of some visual content. Therefore inscriptions in images were not obligatory, systematic, or necessary;¹² they always responded to the impulse to create a complex visual paradigm, an object combining writing and image for the production of an increased meaning.

Medieval verse, from Carolingian times to the end of twelfth century, can be generically defined as a “measured portion of text” the cohesion of which is based both on the formal and spatial arrangement, and meaning¹³; on a formal, semantic, and aesthetic setting and displays of language¹⁴. As it is still the case in actual artistic creation, medieval images and verses cannot be conceived without their relationship to space, whether on the page on which the poem was inscribed or the place of its recitation or psalmody¹⁵. Medieval *imago* and poetry belonged to their creator’s theater of representations, but they were deeply entrenched in material (the place and time of artistic performance and experience) to be shaped and transmitted¹⁶.

Writing is based on ordered arrangement of alphabetic signs¹⁷. In graphic gesture and reading, meaning is constructed in the display of a written line on a page or an object. Despite of the fact that verses were measured portions of text, the arrangement of poetry in manuscripts did not always use word-wraps for each verse. As a consequence, such displays have been hiding the visual structure of the poem – its form – in the development of the line-to-line arrangement. In contrast, Carolingian funerary inscriptions for example were more systematic and were intended to show poetry as much to provide a way to hear it, respecting the display of verses on the material. The determining form of funerary monuments, where most of these metrical

texts were engraved, probably invited carvers to respect the disposition of the verses in the length of the gravestones¹⁸, although burial plates of various formats also showed such layout. In such cases, stone becomes poem, the structure of the text merges into the shape of its support. When Salomon, deacon of St. Hilaire in Poitiers (France), died between 976 and 980, the community gave him a verse epitaph located in the north transept of the church¹⁹:

*“Hoc tumulo dominus Salomon requiescit humatus,
Pacificus Domini plenus amore sui,
Corporeo vultu iocundus mente benignus,
Pauperibus clemens, iustitiam sitiens,
Ecclesiae cultor, dignus sacer adque decanus.
Utilis in multis fratribus ipse fuit.
Octobris moriens migravit sorte kalendis.
Clarus in aeternum vivit habendo Deum”.*

This inscription consists of four elegiac distiches. Verses 2, 4, 6 and 8 are pentameters and consist thus of fewer letters than verses 1, 3, 5 and 7. All the lines on stone have been prepared in the same way, using the whole width of the inscription, but the pentameters are engraved slightly on the right side of the epigraphic field /Fig. 2/. The visual effect of “shorter verses” has been strengthened by the engraving of three vertical dots at the beginning of each pentameter, and its constitutive caesura has been marked with a single dot (except in verse 7). The main features of a composition in elegiac distiches are thus underlined by graphic devices that make the poem visually appear as such into the stone slab.

Unlike Salomon’s long epitaph, epigraphic and manuscript *tituli* had usually consisted of a single verse (in contradiction with the etymological meaning of *versus*, which induced a return,

a sequence²⁰); so, such visual features as word-wraps, line-switching could not be used to make poetry visual. On the other hand, the characteristics brevity and density of *tituli* were highlighted in Carolingian manuscripts and objects by original devices: circular or headband inscriptions, plays on the graphic hierarchy, exacerbated uses of abbreviations and letter-plays²¹. In that sense, *tituli* and images converged in their essence, and intermingled in their manifestations. Writing became part of an image and a constitutive element of visual objects.

For an ecology of writing

Carolingian poetry is as inseparable from the voice reciting it as liturgical poetry is from music. Without totally replacing such declamation, fixation of poetry on manuscripts or epigraphic supports is another modality of the verses' life. Layouts, graphic choices, punctuation, colors, sequencing of the verses' parts were some of the ways used to figure poetic voices and to animate the textual content on the projection screen and sounding box of the parchment sheet.

The first illustration of this aspect is almost a caricature /Fig. 3/, the hundred distich long dedicatory poem on folio 1r of the first Bible of Charles the Bald²². Drawn in gold letters on purple pages, the text is positioned on two columns, on both sides of two first opening folios, creating a rhythmic sequence of eight groups of twenty-five verses. The second column of each sheet begins with a pentameter, linked by syntax to the preceding hexameter but opening the meaning of the versed sequence in the right column. The very regular display of this poem constructs illustrated double pages on which poetic writing acts as a threshold at the entrance

of the Bible and echoes the great full illuminated pages²³. It gives a monumental *mise en scène* of poetry, both at prosodic and semantic levels. The main visual fact about this poem lies in the use of joined "purple boxes" which drive the poem outside the pages, creating the visual effect of twin wax tablets gathered in a diptych. Poetry is thus shaped *as if it was an object* thanks to the regularity of each verse. Measure is not only a matter of making the poem "sound" good but also of making it "look" good.

On another hand, in the images of the same Bible, verse *tituli* conform to various layouts: in or outside the frames, separating or binding the scenes. In all cases, cuts and word-wraps correspond to structural elements in the composition of hexameters and

-
- 12 Debiais, "L'écriture dans l'image peinte romane" (n. 4), p. 110.
 13 Pascale Bourgain, "Qu'est-ce qu'un vers au Moyen Âge", *Bibliothèque de l'École des chartes*, cXLVII (1989), p. 233.
 14 Bourgain, "Qu'est-ce qu'un vers au Moyen Âge" (n. 13), p. 234; Paul Zumthor, *La lettre et la voix*, Paris 1987, pp. 107–129.
 15 Anne-Marie Christin, *L'image écrite ou la déraison graphique*, Paris 1995, pp. 11–20.
 16 Anne-Marie Christin, *L'invention de la figure*, Paris 2011, pp. 23–51.
 17 Dominique Barbet-Massin, *L'enluminure et le sacré (Irlande et Grande-Bretagne, VII^e–VIII^e siècle)*, Paris 2013, pp. 260–263; Benjamin Tilghman, "The Shape of the Word: Extralinguistic Meaning in Insular Display Lettering", *Word & Image*, xxvii/3 (2011), pp. 292–308.
 18 On Carolingian funerary inscriptions, see Cécile Treffort, *Mémoires carolingiennes. L'épithaphe entre célébration mémorielle, genre littéraire et manifeste politique (milieu du VIII^e–début XI^e siècle)*, Rennes 2007.
 19 *Corpus des inscriptions de la France médiévale*, Poitiers 1974, 59, pp. 59–60, Fig. 38. This inscription was removed from its original location in the 1950's. It is now placed in the south wall of the apse.
 20 Bourgain, "Qu'est-ce qu'un vers au Moyen Âge" (n. 13), p. 232.
 21 Éric Palazzo, "Tituli et enluminures dans le haut Moyen Âge (IX^e–XI^e siècles): fonctions liturgiques et spirituelles", in *Épigraphie et iconographie* (n. 6), pp. 167–191.
 22 Paris, BnF, ms. lat. 1. On this poem, see the book by Paul E. Dutton, Herbert L. Kessler, *The Poetry and Paintings of the First Bible of Charles the Bald*, Ann Arbor 1997, pp. 104–113.
 23 Estelle Ingrand-Varenne, "Le manuscrit : support d'inscriptions. L'exemple du ms. 425 (105) de la Médiathèque de Poitiers", in *Épigraphie médiévale et culture manuscrite. Actes du troisième congrès international d'épigraphie médiévale (Poitiers, 2009)*, Rennes 2014, forthcoming.



3/ Dedicatory poem, First Bible of Charles the Bald, BnF, ms. lat. 1., Paris, 9th century

4/ Apse mosaic, Palatine Chapel, Germigny-des-Près, ca. 906

5/ Binding of St. Gall *Evangelium longum*, ms. 53, Stiftsbibliothek, St. Gall

pentameters (cuts, caesura, rhymes), and resonate with some patterns and devices in the image, or with its overall design. The relationship between verses and images is symbiotic and effects a mutual enrichment of visual and legible.

The inscription of the apse mosaic in Theodulf of Orléans' oratory in Germigny-des-Près is one of the best-known *tituli* of Carolingian art and illustrates the different points of its definition /Fig. 4/²⁴. That is the reason it has often been used in scholarship in order to demonstrate the high level of elaboration of that type of short poems. For this demonstration, one should perhaps take a less known example, namely the binding of the St. Gall *Evangelium longum*, made around 895 /Fig. 5/²⁵. In the centre of the flat top an ivory plaque is enshrined, divided into three registers separated by two inscribed bands where one can read: "*Hic residet Christus virtutum stemmate septus*". In the centre of the median register, limited above and below by epigraphic writing, an enthroned figure of Christ stands in a *mandorla*, blessing and holding a book. Around the *mandorla* are the four evangelists, figure both by the author and his symbol, as well as two seraphim and angels bearing thuribles; in the lower part of the same register are personifications of Earth and Sea. The content of the *titulus* is not reflected in the image, even if the word *stemmate* can be associated with vegetal ornamentation on registers 1 and 3. It does not refer to the figures carved in register 2. Only the word *Christus* effects a connection between text and image. That is why it is placed in the middle of the upper written line. The Greek letter *chi* is located exactly on the axis of Christ's throne and highlights the vertical and symmetrical construction of the St. Gall ivory plate. The leonine rime (which is supposed to be symmetrical by definition) between *Christus* and *septus* has not been highlighted in the textual display. The designer preferred to cut the fourth foot *virtutum* and to draw the viewer's attention on its content. So, nothing is simple in this very short text. What does the word *stemma* refer to? What does the deictic word *hic* designate? The distance between the word (its destination, its meaning) and the content of the image is characteristic of the *titulus*; it allows to consider that this text, developed by a monk who also participated in the completion of the manuscript, also referred to the Gospels, i.e. the place where Christ himself lives forever²⁶.

Generally speaking, inscriptions of Early Middle Ages never simplify iconographic content; on the

contrary, they condense visual meaning by bringing the lexical, graphic and sonorous dimensions of metrical poetry into play. The disposition of texts in relation to images (and *vice versa*) in monuments or objects bearing epigraphic writing could be considered even more meaningful than in the manuscript domain; the investment of the material by letters committed an ordering and an animation of the material itself. Thanks to the presence of writing, material becomes full of life and meaning. In St. Gall example as in many texts written on epigraphic material, letters were not carved only to suggest the artist's poetic ambition; stone or metal stage the verses, making the poem sensible and making everyone feel its intensity.

Let us return to the holy water bucket of Milan /Figs 6 a, b, c, d/. On each side of the Virgin and Child image are represented the evangelists according to the iconographic tradition of the author portrait, which is both an image of divine inspiration and of witnessing. It was common in Carolingian Gospels where each full-page image was accompanied by a verse commenting on the figure²⁷. This *titulus* was common to borrow, at least for the construction of the hexameter, from the *Carmen paschale*, composed by Sedulius in the fifth century; this poem highlights the relationship between the author's name, the first words of his Gospel, and his symbolic figure:

*"Hoc Matthaeus agens hominem generaliter implet.
 Marcus ut alta fremit vox per deserta leonis.
 Jura sacerdotii Lucas tenet ore juvenici.
 More volans aquilae verbo petit astra Johannes"*²⁸.



24 On this inscription, see May Vieillard-Troiekourov, "Germigny-des-Prés, l'oratoire privé de l'abbé Théodulpe", *Dossiers de l'archéologie. Charlemagne et la Renaissance carolingienne*, xxx (1978), pp. 40–49; Anne-Orange Poilpré, "Le décor de l'oratoire de Germigny-des-Prés: l'authentique et le restauré", *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale*, xli (1998), pp. 281–298. Recently, Cécile Treffort, *Paroles inscrites. À la découverte des sources épigraphiques latines du Moyen Âge*, Rosny-sous-Bois 2008, pp. 78–82.

25 Size of the central ivory plate: 32 x 15.5 x 0.9–1.2 cm. For an excellent reproduction and all the bibliography about this manuscript, see <http://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/fr/description/csg/0053>.

26 Éric Palazzo, "Le livre-corps à l'époque carolingienne et son rôle dans la liturgie de la messe et sa théologie", *Quaestiones Mediaevi Novae*, 15 (2010), pp. 31–63.

27 On that topic, see *Trésors carolingiens. Livres manuscrits de Charlemagne à Charles le Chauve*, Paris 2007, pp. 56–57. For an example, see Paris, BnF, ms. lat. 266, f. 22v (Lothair's Gospels, ca. 850).

28 *Sedulii opera omnia*, J. Huener ed., Wien (1885), pp. 41–42, v. 355–358, *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* 10.



Inscriptions on the bucket only took from Sedulius the association between names and animals; the “spirit” and “color” of each gospel are still there (desert for Mark, voice for Luke, earth for Matthew, sky for John), but the relation to the *Carmen paschale* is more distant and blurry²⁹. The painted images in Carolingian manuscripts and the carved figures on the Milan object not only show the author’s portrait but also refer to his symbol and the action of inspired writing; they add to the complex economy of visuality and its interaction with writing some elements which are not in the *titulus*. The image and the inscription are not explaining one another, quite the contrary; their interaction weaves a dense network of internal references, from the image to the text, from the text to the image, from one image to another, from one verse to another. As an example, we can see that the use of words referring to human voice and animal parts (*ore*, repeated twice, *dicta*, *remugit*, *narrat*) in three verses creates an echo from one figure to another and introduces a sonorous dimension absent from these images. They actually present a silent writing (the evangelist’s mouth is explicitly closed whereas its eyes are wide open) and the sight tension is not mentioned in the inscriptions. The poetic force of the hexameter, its elliptical aspect and lexical richness, compose an original image combining voice and shape, an image based on differences in content and language of the two media.

Sedulius’ verses can be read on numerous works of art, with variants and innovations, from the Carolingian era to the end of the twelfth century³⁰. A close version of the Sedulius’ verse regarding John has been chosen to be inscribed above his figure on Milan lustral bucket: “*Celsa petens aquile vultum gerit astra Johannes*”. Here, the “spirit” and “color” remain thanks to slight changes in the vocabulary, not in the meaning. On an ivory plate in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lyon /Fig. 7/, dated to the tenth century³¹, the second hemistich of John’s hexameter taken from Sedulius’ poem has been engraved over a winged figure (which might as well be that of an angel rather of a hawk): “*Verbo astra petit Johannes*”. On the plaques of Cividale del Friuli (c. 780), Sedulius’ four verses have been inscribed *verbatim* on the books hold by evangelists’ symbols³².

As in Cividale and in Milan, the headband, frame, or cartridge, where the text dedicated to each evangelist is written in most early medieval images, allows the development and monumental display of the morphological meaning of the word *versus*. As the

verse is a “measured portion of text”, limited epigraphic fields in which most of these inscriptions are placed program a section of space to receive the written forms. Even if this shape is not fully restrictive, and even if medieval artists had graphic solutions to adapt contents and epigraphic spaces, the even virtual determination of epigraphic field isolates a portion over the epigraphic object, as the verse isolates a portion of text. It allows both iconic and alphabetic signs to enter in a same *composition* in which every single element can “act” and signify according to its measured semantic and visual weight. On the upper plate of Roda portable altar³³, dated tenth century and kept in the Girona Museum (Spain), a distich has been inscribed following the shape of two rectangles, one inside the other, around the central stone: “*Hic virtus Tonantis exaudit pie orantem. Merita sanctorum possunt adjuvari orantem*” /Fig. 8/. In this case, there is no frame, no cartridge. Nevertheless, the display of the inscription on the silver plate follows a geometric display which corresponds to the limits of the verses; as a consequence, only one abbreviation has been used, for *sanctorum*. Facing the figurative “fullness” of the upper plate (four angels, four figures of Christ and four pairs of Greek letters alpha and omega are located around the altar stone), the inscription offers a visual impression of order and balance that can also be found in the distich (and the use of the same final word *orantem*).

Roda’s complex inscription sums up, in a very elliptic sentence, all what is happening on the altar during the celebration of the Eucharist. It doesn’t have any direct relation to the images of the upper plate. So, to the obvious spatial relationship that puts images in contact with writing when iconic and alphabetic signs merge within the same paradigm corresponds a semantic distance between the content of the text and the figurative representation.

29 Such evocative ways of describing textual or sonorous content are common in medieval poetry, especially in the liturgical domain; *proses*, *sequentiae* and *prosulae* have that kind of relation to the antiphons and verses they expand.

30 Robert Favreau, “Épigraphie et miniatures. Les vers de Sedulius et les évangélistes”, *Journal des savants*, 1 (1993), pp. 63–87; this article gives an exhaustive list of Carolingian books and objects inscribed with Sedulius Scottus’ verses.

31 *Corpus des inscriptions de la France médiévale*, tome 17, Paris 1994, R³⁸, 99, Fig. 70.

32 On Cividale inscriptions, see Pietro Rugo, “Visita alle iscrizioni dei monumenti longobardi cividalesi”, in *Epigraphik 1982. Fachtagung für mittelalterliche und neuzeitliche epigraphik Klagenfurt*, Walter Koch ed., Wien 1983, p. 124, Fig. 17–18.

33 *Catalunya romànica*, tome xxiii, Barcelona 1988, pp. 98–101.





7/ Ivory with St. John relief, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon, 10th century

The *titulus* is never a repetition of the image; it is not the transposition of visual forms in poetic and textual field. The linguistic distance between one medium and the other is where the added value born from the encounter of text and image is extended. It is because there actually is such an area of expansion that a new, increased, hijacked or colorful meaning may arise. Carolingian inscriptions are not the transfer of the image into a text: Carolingian images are not the visual illustration of the inscription. Their interrelation creates a complex, fragile, and tense semantic environment where the formal nature of *titulus* can create a rupture of meaning³⁴.

The liturgical meaning of the word *versus*

In accordance with medieval polysemy, vocabulary referring to poetry is rich and complex. The word *versus* has number of meanings, from our “verse” to “stanza” or “poem”, towards technical, grammatical or liturgical uses³⁵. I would like to study some of these liturgical aspects by analyzing the analogies between liturgical *versus* and verse inscriptions in images.

The word *versus* refers to a composition, first a sequence, then a trope for the tenth-twelfth centuries³⁶. It comes from the development of a verse of the Mass, the Alleluia verse for the sequence, an antiphon for other parts of the plain chant, especially the introit antiphon giving the general topic of the celebration. Created from or around this verse, the trope is a relatively short stanza; it can be considered as an additional stratum that enriches, glosses, comments on the original text; it also brings poetic developments with additional images, reformulations or biblical harmonics. The trope is not intended to explain the verse or antiphon, usually clear enough to give, in a few words, the liturgical theme³⁷, but to say something “more” or something “different” maintaining the “color” and “spirit” of the original verse.

One of the most famous verses, known from a manuscript of St. Gall and probably composed by the artist who realized the *Evangelium longum* binding himself, was placed into the introit of Nativity mass *Puer natus est*³⁸:

“Hodie cantandus est nobis puer, quem gignebat ineffabiliter ante tempora pater, et eundem sub tempore generavit inclita mater.

Quis est iste puer, quem tam magnis praeconiis dignum vociferates? Dicite nobis, ut collaudatores esse possimus.

Hic enim est, quem praesagus et electus symmista Dei ad terram venturum praevidens longe ante praenotavit sicque praedixit."

It introduced the antiphon, creating an anticipation of the content and an invitation to sing. This trope, sometimes sung by two choirs to reinforce the poetic and dramatic intensity of gloss, gives a large number of elements that are not in the liturgical source (for example, it develops the theme of divine kinship)³⁹. The introit/trope coupling merges into a complex discourse on Christological nature and the redeeming mission of the Son. In some early books containing these tropes, they are accompanied by illuminations which do not show the content of the *Puer natus est* introit but the complex image created by the fusion of the trope and the antiphon⁴⁰.

In many aspects and by analogy, the nature of the relationship between trope and verse is similar to that of the interference between image and *titulus*: semantic density of the source (the medieval image and liturgical texts share the same ability to *express* thanks to evocation more than they *say*); proximity between source and product (the trope is sung during the verse, or immediately after, the *titulus* is placed in contact with the image); poetic nature (whose effectiveness depends on evocation, suggestion and illustration); brevity (the trope is limited to one or two very short stanzas, the *titulus* to a single verse or a distich); expansive function (the product, trope or *titulus*, brings additional meaning).

The analogy between trope and *titulus* also involves the effectiveness of the source-text or source-image. Liturgical chant puts the text of the verse in motion and the trope in resonance. The sacramental activation of liturgical words by singing and music and their amplification by the poetic nature of tropes contribute to the presence of what actually is transcendent during the celebration⁴¹. The *titulus* plays the same role in the image by activating the content of the representation and showing what is, by nature or choice, ineffable, or diffuse, or inexpressible⁴². For example, the *titulus* painted around the Nativity scene in the Averbode Gospels /Fig. 9/, in the library of the University of Liège closely reflects the trope of the introit *Puer natus est* (that actually appears in the scrolls held by the figures located in the upper part of the image, near the image of the New Born). On the lower part, Virgin Mary lies in her bed near Joseph and they are both looking at Jesus in the upper part of the page through an open veil. The double

composition, with two scenes gathering in the motive of the open veil as sign of the Revelation, is underlined by the arrangement of four verses outside the main frame of the image. In its content, this short poem reminds the Nativity trope and it evokes some aspects that the painter did not mention in the image, as Jesus' virginal conception, in the lower part of the folio: "*Virginis hic partus quem Deus est homo factus. Edit stella maris natum sine semine mari*"⁴³.

Beyond the aesthetic dimension of poetry allowing the image to *be* and *exist* beyond the improbable limit of forms, the *titulus* convenes an active capacity of writing to animate the image, and allow it to *make*. Do liturgical texts or images suffer from a limit in their ability to signify or to do? Are the trope and the *titulus* essential to carry out the nature and function of liturgy or images? The richness of the liturgical and iconographic corpus obviously demonstrates the opposite, but the number of *tituli* and texts of liturgical poetry reflects the added value of poetic writing in intermediality of cultural phenomena.

Conclusion

Carolingian verse inscriptions are not isolated literary phenomena within the history of medieval poetic forms. They reinterpret ancient patterns of the *tituli* found in Paulinus of Nola, Venantius Fortunatus, Eugene of Toledo, etc. They are placed in the perspective of Greek, Latin and Byzantine poetic developments as ekphrasis and periegesis⁴⁴. They borrow ancient rhetorical structures able to reveal the content of a text under the reader's or spectator's eyes. As the whole Carolingian poetic production did, the aesthetic ambitions of epigraphic texts changed after the second half of the eighth

34 Debiais, "L'écriture dans l'image peinte romane" (n. 4), p. 105.

35 Bourgain, "Qu'est-ce qu'un vers au Moyen Âge" (n. 13), p. 232.

36 *Ibidem*, p. 236 et sq.

37 Gunilla Iversen, *Chanter avec les anges. Poésie dans la messe médiévale: interprétations et commentaires*, Paris 2001, pp. 19–25.

38 *Ibidem*, pp. 45–47.

39 Then comes the antiphon "*Puer natus est nobis*". Iversen, *Chanter avec les anges* (n. 37), p. 46.

40 For example, see Paris, Arsenal, ms. 1169, f. 3v.

41 On this topic, see Éric Palazzo, "Art, Liturgy and the Five Senses in the Early Middle Ages", *Viator*, xli/1 (2010), pp. 25–56.

42 Cécile Voyer, "Donner corps au Verbe. Les images de l'Annonciation au Moyen Âge central", in *Matérialités et immatérialité de l'église au Moyen Âge*, Bucarest 2012, pp. 101–112.

43 Liège, Bibliothèque de l'Université, ms. 363, f. 17.

44 Ruth Webb, "The Aesthetics of Sacred Space: Narrative, Metaphor and Motion in 'Ekphrasis' of Church Buildings", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, lxxiii (1999), pp. 59–74; Vincent Debiais, "La vue des autres. L'ekphrasis au risque de la littérature médiolatine", *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale*, lvi (2012), pp. 393–404.



Quis est cuius veneramus in hoc homo dices



Ecce stella maris natum sine femine matris

8/ Roda portable altar, Girona Museum, 10th century

9/ Nativity, Averbode Gospels, ms. 363, fol. 17, Bibliothèque de l'Université, Liège

century. In a conception of arts that gave to literature the ability to shape the whole artistic manifestations, poems dated from the fourth through seventh centuries could visually exist independently of the images they accompanied or commented. In the Carolingian world, when Horace's *ut pictura poesis* was transformed, nuanced, and reversed⁴⁵, the *titulus* joined an object or a real image, in a semantic reciprocity. Literature, and especially poetry, no longer gave a shape, by its own language efficiency, to sculpture or drawing; the figurative dimension of Carolingian language and image would now act in full reciprocity for the elaboration of a complex discourse.

Such radiant efficiency, from inscriptions to works of art and *vice versa*, persisted in the *tituli* of Romanesque images, in very rich compositions in manuscripts and in monumental arts. The multiplication of inscriptions within the same object no longer made one or two verse(s) visible, but entire poems claiming a kind of unity and organicity for these works of arts. The Crucifixion page in Uta codex⁴⁶, the reliquary of Saint Charlemagne in Aachen⁴⁷ and the wall paintings of the church of Ceri⁴⁸ are inscribed with many texts on the margins of the images, depending on the location of the scenes; but they can be read from one point to another as a unique poem. The etymology of the word *versus* then found a form of fullness, and poetry spread out in the design of Romanesque aesthetics. Carolingian *tituli* shaped an original literary landscape that had, because of the historical and theological context of their creation, a reflexive dimension on the very notion of *imago*. They will be picked up and reused in a first theology of art, placing the use of poetry at the principle of the figurative elaboration.

45 Vincent Debiais, "La poétique de l'image, entre littérature classique et épigraphie médiévale", *Veleia. Revista de Prehistoria, Historia Antigua, Arqueología y Filología Clásicas*, xxix (2012), pp. 51–52.

46 On this image, see Adam S. Cohen, *The Uta Codex. Art, Philosophy and Reform in Eleventh-Century Germany*, University Park 2000, pp. 55–75.

47 Vincent Debiais, "Interactions textes/images dans la chaise dite de saint Charlemagne : quelques réflexions à propos du discours persuasif", in *Comunicazione e propaganda nei secoli XII e XIII. Atti del convegno internazionale (Messina, 24–26 mai 2007)*, Rossana Castano, Fortunata Latella, Tania Sorenti eds, Rome 2008, pp. 237–254.

48 On Ceri frescoes, see Nino Zchomelidse, *Santa Maria Immacolata in Ceri. Pittura sacra al tempo della Riforma Gregoriana*, Rome 1996.

Summary/ Karolinské *tituli* a obrazy: od este- tiky k účinnosti

Článek je věnován výzkumu vztahů mezi obrazem a poezií v karolinském období. Historiografie si již mnohokrát povšimla používání metrických veršů pro nápisy určené ke komentování, identifikaci či glosování vizuálních kompozic, ale zbývá ještě vysvětlit proč umělci a objednatelé systematicky užívali metrický *titulus* k doplnění obrazu.

Na příkladové studii *situly* (nádoby na svěcenou vodu) biskupa Gotofreda (cca 975), dnes uchovávané v pokladnici Milánského dómu, se článek pokouší ilustrovat rozmanitost sémantických vazeb mezi obrazovou kompozicí a veršem, obzvláště pomocí textů označujících evangelisty, které přejímají strukturu *Carmen paschale* od Sedulia Scotta. Tento vzácný předmět, na němž je možné spatřit texty mající všechny charakteristiky *titulu* (stručnost, hustota, hry se zvучností a slovními opozicemi), nám umožňuje se domnívat, že i další nápisy té doby odkazují právě ke *Carmen paschale*.

Z nepřehledného množství forem a funkcí středověké epigrafické dokumentace vyvstává určitý počet společných rysů mezi veršem a obrazem. Jako „vyměřená porce řeči“ formuluje *titulus* ve stejném paradigmatu – podobně jako obraz – rozdílné prvky k tomu, aby představil, zobrazil a ukázal smysl v syntaktickém intervalu mezi pomlkou a sémantickou variací a expanzí. Článek analyzuje vzdálenost

mezi obsahem verše a obrazu skrze určitý počet uměleckých děl vytvořených před rokem 1000, jedná se o vazbu knihy *Evangelium Longum* ze Sankt Gallen, přenosný oltář ze San Pere de Roda, reliéf sv. Jana z Musée de Beaux-Arts de Lyon a reliéfy z Cividale del Friuli.

Studium vztahů mezi písmem a jeho výtvarným a materiálním kontextem poukazuje na fakt, že *tituli* jsou určeny k tomu, aby byla poezie nejen viděna, ale také slyšena, neboť přenáší definiční prvky verše (návrat, stručnost, posunutí) od zvukového k viditelnému. Kámen, kov a slonovina se tak stávají místy pro psaní poezie v kontaktu s karolinským vyobrazením a jeho formami. Poslední část článku je věnována studiu liturgického významu slova *versus*, které v kontextu liturgické poezie označuje část verše, která se staví vedle zpívané části mše a bohoslužby nebo ji překrývá. Stvořen k tomu, aby metaforicky obohatil text antifony, vytváří *versus* nová zobrazení v „prostoru“ liturgického zpěvu. Také jeho fungování se na formální i sémantické úrovni blíží *titulu* v rámci obrazu.

Na základě těchto srovnání se článek pokouší ukázat, že *titulus* je projevem k zamyšlení nad obrazem; často určuje jeho význam tím, že jej osvobozuje od útisku forem, které s sebou v rovině znaků přináší tvorba v karolinské době.