



Notam superponere studui: the use of technical signs in the Carolingian period

von Evina Steinova

1000 Worte Forschung: PhD project in History, Huygens ING/Utrecht University

URL: <https://mittelalter.hypotheses.org/4399>

Lizenz:



CC BY-SA 3.0 Unported – Creative Commons, Namensnennung, Weitergabe unter gleichen Bedingungen

Zitation: Evina Steinova, Notam superponere studui: the use of technical signs in the Carolingian period, in: Mittelalter. Interdisziplinäre Forschung und Rezeptionsgeschichte, 29. September 2014, <https://mittelalter.hypotheses.org/4399>.

If you were asked to pinpoint a scientist in a crowd, how would you recognize one? Or if you were asked to identify a scientific publication among other books, how would you be able to tell it is one? And what would you do if you were to identify scientists, scientific books and scientific institutions from five hundred or thousand years ago, when the scientific world looked quite different from how it looks now?

In my research project, I am looking at manuscripts produced some 1200 years ago, during the period known as the Carolingian Renaissance. More than 7000 books survive from this period of great intellectual flowering, some practically **untouched** from the day they were made, other **filled with notes and jottings** from edge to edge. Books of the latter kind (and books containing any marginalia) often disclose the working of scholars and thinkers and thus allow us to understand how knowledge was produced, disseminated, and used in this period. I am particularly interested in one feature of such annotated books – the presence of **technical signs** in the margins. Such signs have been used by scholars and thinkers since Antiquity, continued to be part of the scholarly toolkit in the Middle Ages and fell out of use in the course of the late Middle Ages and early modern period. They are a good aid in identifying manuscripts that were used for scholarly purposes, scholarly communities, scholars themselves (since many of them had their own style of using these signs), locations where knowledge was manufactured and consumed, and topics which stimulated scholarly inquiry.

In the course of my research, I examined some 180 manuscripts from the Carolingian period which were produced in Bavaria. This region has two interesting features. First, manuscripts produced here in the early Middle Ages only rarely left Bavaria. They were often preserved in the same location where they were made well into modern times. At the same time, however, Bavaria was an important transition zone that one needed to cross in order to reach Italy, if one was traveling by land from the Frankish territories and also if one traveled from the Apennine peninsula northwards. As a result, we know that many individuals traveling from one of these regions into another passed through Bavaria. These individuals in some cases brought along new knowledge and new practices and left their trace in the margins of local books.

Because of this, manuscripts from Bavaria contain technical signs made both by the local, Bavarian scholars and by scholars coming from other areas. The scholarly practices conserved in their margins reflect, thus, both Bavarian manner of annotation and practices, which can be identified, based on a comparison with books and texts from other areas, as Frankish, Beneventan (Southern Italy) and Irish. Furthermore, the set of 180 manuscripts I have been examining provides a good overview of the general traits of a codex in the Carolingian period overall. It can help us to understand what portion of it tended to be annotated on average and thus what degree of annotation should be considered an under- or overperformance. Besides, it also discloses how many and which technical signs were

commonly at the disposal of a scribe and thus also which signs were *not* standard and may point to special practices or intentions behind the act of annotation.

One of the important preliminary conclusions I reached is that, at least in some places, there seems to have been a rather large difference between ‘casual annotation’ and ‘annotation carried out with extra care’. It might reflect the distinction between the scribes on the one hand and scholars on the other. Naturally, all scholars in the period were also scribes, since they participated in book production and received the same elementary education as the scribes. This is also clear from the fact that the signs used by scribes and scholars belong to the same basic set. What distinguishes the average scribe from a scholar, or rather from a scribe whose activities went beyond mere copying, correcting and reading of books, was how the same signs were deployed.

A study of the usage of the scholarly signs in the Carolingian period (the *praxis*), cannot do without the study of the *doxa*, i.e. how the signs were talked and thought about. The doxographic sources, specifically the different lists of technical signs which can be found in the Carolingian manuscripts, provide us with an important glimpse into the formation of an early medieval intellectual. The Bavarian manuscripts by and large reveal them to us as fully formed scholars. The doxographic sources show us how these scholars came into being through classroom education. Again, most of this happened on the level of communities of scribes, who were throughout this and the earlier period the most important group to keep this practice alive. However, those who engaged in writing about the signs were scholars, among them well-known individuals such as Alcuin, Hraban Maur, Paul the Deacon, Hincmar of Reims and Prudentius of Troyes. These scholars, too, used the signs they acquired in the course of their education in new, innovative ways which went beyond simply reproducing what they were taught by their masters.

If we were to look at scientists of today from a distance of a thousand years, we might perceive them not so different from how we now look at the medieval scholars – an anonymous mass in which only a handful of well-known names stand out. However, science is first and foremost a collective enterprise and can be studied through the practices that define different scientific communities and disciplines. In a thousand years, we could see how scientists of today collaborated, networked and communicated by looking at how they use footnotes or whom they cite. We could be able to see the divides between different disciplines, schools of thought and regional circles and in some cases, it is even possible to pinpoint individuals moving across the globe, hopping from one university to another, by identifying his or hers idiosyncratic mode of writing. In the same fashion, the early medieval technical signs – much as modern footnotes or references – can help us grasp the knowledge network of the Carolingian Renaissance. We can see a scholar, who must have been trained in Ireland, in the farthest reach of Europe, who left his trace in a book from the library of Regensburg in Bavaria. Elsewhere, we can see a scholar who received his education at Monte Cassino in Southern Italy at work in the monastery of Corbie in Northern France, showing us that lively contacts existed between these two

rather distant places. In other cases, the distance crossed by the scholars was smaller, such as in the case of Abbo of Fleury in Northern France who travelled as a 'visiting scholar' to Ramsey in England and brought along his Frankish practice of annotating manuscripts.