
DE INVENTORIBUS LITTERARUM: THE HISTORY OF WRITING AS SEEN BY CAROLINGIAN SCHOLARS

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Résumé

A l'époque carolingienne, les lettrés qui oeuvrent activement à la réforme religieuse et culturelle du *regnum Francorum*, portent une attention particulière à l'histoire de l'écriture et à l'invention de l'alphabet. Dans les chroniques et les traités de grammaire, plusieurs traditions s'articulent, puisant à des sources antérieures l'histoire de la *translatio studii* à travers le déluge ou celle de la chaîne historique des inventeurs, de l'écriture hébraïque puis grecque à l'alphabet latin. Certains textes, notamment un court traité attribué à Raban Maur, élargissent la perspective au-delà des frontières de la chrétienté. Tous témoignent d'une conscience vive du caractère conventionnel de l'écriture, de son rapport étroit avec la culture et la langue, et participe à une imprégnation quotidienne soutenant le vaste mouvement de la *renovatio* carolingienne.

Mots clés: écriture, *regnum Francorum*, *translatio studii*, réforme carolingienne

Abstract

In the Carolingian period, scholars who work actively in the religious and cultural reform of the *regnum Francorum*, pay attention to the history of writing and the invention of the alphabet. Chronicles and grammatical treatises use several previous traditions to draw the history of the *translatio studii* through the Flood or the historical chain of inventors for the Hebrew, Greek and Latin alphabets. Some texts, including a short treatise attributed to Raban Maur, widen the perspective beyond the frontier of the Christendom. All show a lively consciousness of the conventional nature of the writing, its narrow relationship with the culture and the language, and by a daily impregnation, support the vast movement of the carolingian *renovatio*.

Key Words: writing, *regnum Francorum*, *translatio studii*, carolingian reform

* Unless otherwise specified, the English translation of texts and quotations is by PangurBàn Ltd.

The Carolingian period, frequently associated with the idea of renaissance, is well known for its significant impact on linguistics and script. The reform of Latin was accompanied by the appearance of a new script, the Caroline minuscule, which supported the diffusion of the manuscripts produced at the most important *scriptoria* of the empire. Indispensable to the royal administration as well as to the diffusion of Christian faith and liturgy throughout the *regnum Francorum*, written culture was also at the heart of an education system whose religious dimension was undeniable. The search for ancient texts or the mass production of copies of certain kinds of works came with an intensive activity of composition and writing of treatises of all genres, which made the Carolingian period a crucial moment in the history of Western written culture.

This fact is undoubtedly related to the close attention Carolingian scholars paid to the invention and historical development of the art of writing. Drawing at the same time on classical, biblical and apocryphal traditions, they elaborated and disseminated the idea that writing, the result of a certain culture related to a people and their language, is first and foremost a conventional system that can be adapted to the particular circumstances of its function. This continuing adaptation of writing depending on the needs of the people using it is clearly revealed by their focus on the ‘inventors’, historical figures responsible for the emergence of a new means of communication –writing– connected with specific circumstances, or for the adaptation of a pre-existing system to a different milieu.

The Carolingian Scriptural Concern

The concern for writing, including its formal aspect, was particularly lively during the Carolingian period. Without going further into the history of written culture, on which much has already been published, it will suffice here to recall the decisive impetus that Charlemagne gave to a reform aimed, in the first place, at the literal perfection of sacred texts. The renowned *Admonitio generalis*, a capitulary promulgated in Aachen in 789, is quite clear on this matter:

In every monastery and bishopric, teach the Psalms, musical notation, singing, *computus* and grammar, and correct properly the Catholic books, for often, although people wish to pray to God in the proper fashion, they pray improperly because of uncorrected books. Do not allow your pupils to corrupt the books when they copy or read them.¹

Replaced by the also renowned *Epistola de litteris colendis* (ed. MGH, chap. I, p. 79), the capitulary of 789 accelerated the process of liturgical reform already initiated by Pepin the Short and provided impetus for another related phenomenon, the formal transformation of writing. Although there is no extant text demanding the creation of a new script, both the appearance and the subsequent fast and massive spread of Caroline minuscule in the manuscripts issued by the

¹ *Psalmos, notas, cantus, computum, grammaticam per singula monasteria vel episcopia et libros catholicos bene emendate ; quia saepe, dum bene aliqui Deum rogare cupiunt, sed per inemendatos libros male rogant. Et pueros vestros non sinite eos vel legendo vel scribendo corrumpere.* Ed. MGH, chap. I, p. 60.

scriptoria of the *regnum Francorum* emphasize the magnitude of the resources involved. The invention of a new script was accompanied by other graphic methods that broke with the tradition of *scriptio continua*. Among the letters and poems by Alcuin, which enlighten us regarding the dynamics and challenges of this wide-ranging reform, the inscription he devotes to the *scriptorium* at Saint-Martin de Tours speaks volumes as to the mission entrusted to scribes:

May they obtain carefully corrected works and may their quills fly straight. May they distinguish the precise meaning of sentences by means of metrical feet and caesuras, placing the punctuation in its right place, so that the reader in the church, in front of his devout brethren, does not read errors or suddenly holds his tongue by chance.²

The perfection of language that ensured that of the faith, spread by biblical manuscripts, or that of the information and instructions transmitted within the administrative framework, would be now supported by the separation of terms and the use of a punctuation system that facilitated reading aloud, the transmission vector of textual content to an illiterate audience.

Then again, Carolingians were overall aware of the close relationship between the graphical notation of letters and the nature of the sounds thus transcribed, especially from the moment the extent of the Latin world put it in contact with non-Latin speaking populations. Thus, around 870, Otfrid of Weissemburg, in the preface of his *Evangelary*, alludes to his mother tongue with the following words:

Our language has an illiterate appearance since it has never been polished up by its speakers, neither orthographically, nor grammatically [...] My language uses quite often, outside the rules of Latinity (*extra usum latinitatis*), K and Z, not needed according to grammarians; on the other hand, since from time to time the teeth emit a whistling sound, in my language we use Z, and K as well when the throat emits a voiced sound.³

These letters, inherited from the Greek system (GARCEA 2002) and considered as superfluous in the Latin alphabet, enable the transcription of special sounds without adding new letters, an endeavour that several sovereigns had pursued in the previous centuries, apparently without much success. In his *Annals*, Tacitus mentions the wish of Emperor Claudius to follow the example of previous inventors by completing the Latin alphabet:

As regards shape, Latin characters are the same as the oldest Greek characters. In the beginning we had only a few as well; the rest were invented later. After this example, Claudius continues with those which, used under his rule, have in his opinion become obsolete. They can still be seen on official bronze tables placed in public squares and within the temples.⁴

² *Correctosque sibi quaerant studiose libellos, / Tramite quo recto penna volantis eat. / Per cola distinguant proprios et commata sensus, / Et punctos ponant ordine quosque suo, / Ne vel falsa legat, taceat vel forte repente / Ante pios fratres lecto in ecclesia.* Ed. MGH, Poet. lat. I, no. XCIV, p. 320.

³ *Lingua enim haec uelut agrestis habetur, dum a propriis nec scriptura nec arte antiqua est ullis temporibus expolita [...] K et Z sepius haec lingua extra usum latinitatis utitur, quae grammatici inter litteras dicunt esse superfluas. Ob stridorem autem dentium, ut puto, in hac lingua Z utuntur, K autem ob faucium sonoritatem.* Ed. ERDMANN WOLFF 1973 ; French trans. BANNIARD 2003.

⁴ *Et forma litteris Latinis quae veterrimis Graecorum. Sed nobis quoque paucae primum fuere, deinde additae sunt. Quo exemplo Claudius tres litteras adjecit, quae usui imperitante eo, post oblitteratae, aspiciuntur etiam nunc in*

These three so-called Claudian letters had a particular written form for the transcription of a specific sound: the shape of an inverted F to denote consonant U, as in *Uultus*; the shape of an inverted C in order to represent the Greek PS; a vertical stroke with a horizontal stroke on its right side in the middle of the stem for a sound between I and U. Although these erudite curiosities due to a scholarly and learned emperor were not actually passed on to posterity (LASSERRE 2011, p. 35) at least not by themselves, the initiative of Claudius, also recorded by Suetonius,⁵ could have been known to Carolingian scholars, who possessed copies of those historical works (GUERREAU-JALABERT 1981, p. 14).

During the Merovingian period, Gregory of Tours reports a similar initiative undertaken by King Chilperic, who also prided himself on his knowledge of theology and poetry:

He also added letters to our alphabet, that is, W, which the Greeks also possessed, ‘ae’, ‘the’, ‘uui’, letters which were shaped [according to certain designs]; he afterwards sent circulars to all the cities of his kingdom so that those letters were taught to children, and the books written in the olden days were gathered after being polished with pumice stone.⁶

Beyond the monarch’s possible wish to imitate Emperor Claudius, the initiative of Chilperic, which no evidence suggests was actually carried out (RICHÉ 1962, p. 270), clearly responds to the necessity of adapting Latin alphabet to new requirements within the *regnum Francorum*: was it the transcription of the Germanic language (LATOUCHE 1963, p. 312)? Was it a new pronunciation of Latin (RICHÉ 1962, p. 269)? Lacking other testimonies besides the one provided by Gregory of Tours, it is difficult to answer those questions; on the other hand, the diffusion of the *Historia Francorum* during the Carolingian period allows us to infer that this anecdotal endeavour was well known. However, as we will soon see, neither this initiative nor that of Claudius were taken into account in the history of writing elaborated by Carolingian scholars, who were interested in writing as the global graphic system for knowledge transfer.

Besides the occasional addition of several signs in order to adapt letters to sounds, the visual character of writing as a whole, with its communication challenges, is what lies at the heart of Carolingian thought. The literate elite of the time was fully aware of the diversity in the shape of letters within any alphabetic system, of their specific values, and even of their hierarchy. The case of the Roman square capitals, called Uncial, is in this respect particularly remarkable. An

aere publico dis plebiscitis per fora ac templa fixo. Ed. and trans. GOELZE 1966, pp. 289-290.

⁵ *Novas etiam commentus est litteras tres ac numero veterum quasi maxime necessarias addidit.* Ed. and French trans. AILLOUD 1932, p. 146.

⁶ *Addidit autem et litteras litteris nostris, id est W, sicut Graeci habent, ae, the, uui, quarum characteres ibi sunt [...]. Et misit epistulas in universis civitatibus regni sui, ut sic pueri docerentur ac libri antiquitus scripti, planati pomice, rescriberentur.* Ed. MGH, SS, RM, p. 254.

anonymous grammatical commentary extant in a manuscript from Einsiedeln describes this script in the following terms:

Some of them are actually called Uncial: they are the largest and are written at the beginning of books. They are called Uncial because long ago the wealthy weighed them in ounces of gold.⁷

Visually embodying the reference to Antiquity, the Uncial script experienced a remarkable comeback in manuscripts as well as in the epigraphic sphere (TREFFORT 2007), and was included in the dynamics of the graphic expression of imperial power. In any case, it is precisely in this sense that we must understand the testimony of Loup de Ferrière, who in 836 wrote to Einhard of Seligenstadt in order to obtain an official sealed copy (*scedula sigillo munita*), of a ‘model’ alphabet:

It is said that the royal scribe *Bertcaudus* possesses the description and the measures of the old letters. For that reason I beg of you that, if it is possible, you send me only the largest, those called Uncial by some, through this artist (when he gets back) after carefully affixing the seal on the copy.⁸

In a manuscript preserved in Bern that Bernard Bischoff identified with the response sent by Einhard to his correspondent in reply to this request,⁹ we find precisely an alphabet in Uncial script, which was in turn used as the ceremonial script for the manuscript *tituli* and the inscriptions (STIRNEMANN, SMITH, 2007).

Therefore, through the Caroline minuscule and the Roman square capitals, the Carolingian graphic system falls within a creative perspective described as uninterrupted in the histories of writing that flow from the quills of chroniclers or grammarians. A history that, dating back to the beginning of humanity and evolving side by side with major cultural mutations, largely exceeds the limits of the Latin world.

The Flood and the Transmission of Knowledge

Among the accounts of the invention of writing, those that invoke the necessity of protecting a knowledge acquired by men before the Flood are undoubtedly the ones that better show the function of preservation and communication attributed to writing. Over the centuries,

⁷ Einsiedeln, Stiftsbibliothek, MS 112, fol. 143: *Quaedam enim unciales dicuntur, quae et maximae sunt et in initiis librorum scribuntur. Dictae autem unciales, eo quod olim uncia auri a divitibus appenderetur.* Ed. HAGEN, KEIL 1961, pp. 222-223.

⁸ *Praeterea scriptor regius Bertcaudus dicitur antiquarum litterarum, dumtaxat earum quae maximae sunt et unciales a quibusdam vocari existimantur; habere mensuram descriptam, itaque si poenes vos est, mittite mihi eam per hunc, queso, pictorem, cum redierit, scedula tamen diligentissime sigillo munita.* Ed. and French trans. LEVILLAIN 1927, no. 5.

⁹ Bern, Burgerbibliothek, MS 250, fol. 11v. Copied in STIEGMANN, WEMHOFF 1999, pp. 335 (note VI.13) and 336 (illus.).

its invention was considered as closely related to the wish to set things down in order to preserve them beyond the fallible or ephemeral human memory. Whether from the standpoint of Sumerian tradition, according to which the messenger of Emmerkar transported the first tablets written in cuneiform script (ZALI, BERTHIER 1997, p. 11) or from that of Plato's Phaedrus, with the myth of Theuth (ROBIN, 1933, pp. 274-275), writing is always presented as an alternative to oblivion. That is what the anonymous grammatical treatise *Quae sunt quae*, dating from the Carolingian period, explains, in measured terms, glossing on the etymology suggested by Isidore of Seville, among others:

The letter, *littera*, sounds almost like *legitera*, because it shows the way to those who read or because people walk while they read. Letters are the indicators of things, the signs of words. Their strength is such that they recount the words of the absent, who have no voice. The use of letters was discovered to serve the memory of things: indeed, so that things did not fade into oblivion, they were bound to letters. There are indeed so many things that they cannot be all said so that others hear them, or commit them to memory.¹⁰

Allowing for a dialogue with the absent by attaching sounds to matter, writing transcends at once space and time, thus playing a role in contemporary remote communication, but also in the transmission of knowledge to the future. The *translatio studii*, a major concern for Carolingians, who saved so many ancient works copying them on parchment, is indeed at the heart of the story of the two pillars.

There are numerous versions of this legend, in Latin as well as in the vernacular, all of them very well studied, particularly by Jean-Marie Fritz (FRITZ 2004). They all have several common traits: the awareness, shared by direct or indirect descendants of Adam, of the imminence of the destruction of the world by fire or water; their wish to preserve a certain knowledge for future generations; their decision to inscribe that knowledge on two different media (either pillars or tablets), made of clay and stone, so that at least one of them withstood fire or water. The differences between versions concern especially characters, the content of that specific piece of knowledge and its mission, the circumstances of its rediscovery and the use made of it.

The oldest Latin version of the legend is due to John Cassian, a monk of Eastern origin who died in Marseille, where he composed, around 430, the *Institutiones* and the *Collationes*. The eighth of the latter comprised an account that presented a corrupted *translatio studii*. According to this version,

¹⁰ *Quid est littera ? Littera autem dicta est quasi legitera, eo quod legentibus iter praebeat vel quod in legendo itere[n]t<ur>. Litterae sunt indices rerum, signa verborum : quibus tanta vis est, ut nobis dicta absent<i>um sine voce loquantur. Usus litterarum repertus propter memoriam rerum : nam ne oblivione fugient, litteris alligantur. In tanta enim rerum varietate nec dici audiendo poterant omnia, nec memoria contineri.* Ed. MUNZI 2004, p. 32.

the first use of writing, due to Ham, was indeed related to the wish to preserve, beyond the Flood sent by God to purify the world, a magical knowledge:

According to old traditions, Ham, son of Noah, had been initiated to that superstition and those sacrilege and profane arts. Knowing that he would not be able to smuggle into the arch –which he had to board with his father, who was one of the righteous, and his virtuous brethren– a book that recorded it all, he etched the criminal recipes and revolting inventions on metal plates, which would withstand water, and on very hard stones. Once the Flood was over, he began the search for his treasures as carefully as when he had hidden them, and thus transmitted to his posterity a seed of sacrilege and eternal perversity.¹¹

Many details peculiar to this account, and absent from the others, can be remarked: a magical art, regarded as evil; a clandestine transmission; a single active participant in the recording and reception of knowledge; the mention of a possible handwritten volume discarded in favour of an epigraphic form, more likely to survive the fury of the elements once hidden.

The *Collationes* by John Cassian was one of the most renowned books in the Carolingian monastic world: according to the rule of Saint Benedict they were explicitly required for the monks' mealtime reading (VOGÜÉ, NEUFVILLE, chap. XLII and LXXIII) and they are repeatedly cited in numerous library catalogues from the 9th and 10th centuries.¹² However, this account was not the object of any revival in later texts, unlike the version by Flavius Josephus, who brought up the transmission not of magic but of the liberal arts, astronomy in the first place, which he attributed to Seth, son of Adam and Eve.

Flavius Josephus was a Jewish author who lived in Palestine in the 2nd century before Christ; he was the author of *The Antiquities of the Jews*, a chronicle of the Jewish people after the creation of the world, which was translated into Latin around the 6th-7th century. He conveys, in particular, the following version of the legend:

They had discovered the science of celestial bodies and their order in heaven. Afraid that their inventions did not reach men and were lost before they got to be known (Adam had indeed foreseen a universal cataclysm caused by on the one hand a violent fire, and on the other, a water flood), they erected two pillars, one made of earth the other made of stone, and etched on both the knowledge they had acquired. In case the earth pillar disappeared in the flood, the one of stone would prevail to teach men what they had recorded there, thus testifying to the fact that they had also erected one made of earth. This pillar still stands in the land of Syria». ¹³

¹¹ *Quantum itaque antiquae traditiones ferunt, Cham filius Noe, qui superstitionibus istis et sacrilegis ac profanis erat una cum patre justo ac sanctis fratribus ingressurus scelestas artes ac profana commenta diversorum metallorum lamminis, quae scilicet aquarum conrumpi inundatione non possent, et durissimis lapidibus insculpsit. Quae peracto diluvio eadem qua celeverat curiositate perquirens ac perpetuae nequitiae seminarium transmisit in posteros.* Ed. and French trans. PICHÉRY 1958, pp. 30-31. Cited by FRITZ 2004, p. 130.

¹² In the 9th century, for instance, in Reichenau in 822 (ed. BECKER 1885, no. 6, 313-318), in Saint-Riquier in 831 (ibid, no. 11, 121), or in Saint-Gall (ibid., no. 15, 287-297).

¹³ *Disciplinam vero rerum caelestium et ornatum earum primitus invenerunt. Et ne dilaberentur ab hominibus quae ad eis inventa videbantur, aut antequam venirent ad notitiam deperirent, cum praedixisset Adam exterminationem*

Before the middle of the 11th century, this account was the one revisited by early medieval literature (FRITZ 2004, p. 136), frequently in accordance with the abridged formula of Isidore of Seville's *Chronica*:

In that time, as Josephus narrates, men, knowing that they could disappear either by fire or by water, inscribed their knowledge on two pillars made of clay and stone, so that the things they had discovered by their wisdom would not be erased from memory. It is said that one of the pillars escaped the Flood and still stands today in Syria.¹⁴

This text is quoted almost to the word by Carolingian chroniclers as Ado of Vienne.¹⁵ Although based on a common framework, the accounts vary. In their commentaries on Genesis, several exegetes as Rabanus Maurus or Haimo of Auxerre attribute this first use of writing not to Seth, inventor of astronomy, but to Jubal, inventor of music or, as Remigius of Auxerre claims, of all liberal arts (FRITZ 2004, pp. 134-135).

In the different texts inspired by the *Antiquities of the Jews* and conveyed by Isidore of Seville, the main characters of the story appear mostly as users of writing, as if it already existed. In any case, several Carolingian grammarians do bring up the notion of invention strictly speaking, using the same narrative motifs but featuring Enoch, instead of Seth or Jubal. To the question: 'How many inventors of letters were there among Hebrews?', Donat, called the Grammarian, responds around 815:

Enoch had first invented letters before the Flood, he who was allegedly the seventh after Adam. It is said, according to Josephus, that Enoch wrote down many of them on both a stone and a clay pillar, and he did so because Enoch had heard from his ancestors, maybe from Adam himself, that the world would be destroyed by means of two punishments, through fire and water. But he did not know through which element it would be destroyed first, and therefore he erected two pillars, one made of stone, the other made of bricks, etching on them the letters he had invented.¹⁶

In this case it is a true invention, attributed to one Enoch, described as 'seventh after Adam', as the prophet mentioned in the Epistle of Jude (Jude 1, 14-15), regarded as the most ancient scribe,

rerum omnium unam ignis virtute, alteram vero aquarum vi ac multitudine fore venturam, duas facientes columnas, aliam quidem ex lateribus, aliam vero ex lapidibus, ambabus quae invenerant conscripserunt, ut etsi constructa lateribus exterminaretur ab imbribus, lapidea permanens praeberet hominibus scripta cognoscere simul et quia lateralem aliam posuissent ; quae tamen lapidea permanet hactenus in terra Syria. Ed. BLATT 1958, p. 132.

¹⁴ *His temporibus, ut refert Iosephus, scientes illi homines quot aut igne aut aquis perire poterant, in duabus columnis ex latere et lapide factis studia sua conscripserunt ne deleterentur memoria quae sapienter invenerant. Quarum lapidea columna fertur diluvium evasisse et hactenus in Syria permanere.* Ed. MARTÍN DE LA HOZ 2003, pp. 16-19.

¹⁵ *Noe, divino oraculo jubente, anno aetatis suae quingentesimo, arcam aedificare coepit. His temporibus, ut refert Josephus, scientes illi homines quod aut aquis aut igne perire poterant, in duabus columnis, ex latere et lapide factis, studia sua conscripserunt, ne deleterentur memoria quae sapienter invenerant. Quarum lapidea columna fertur in diluvio durasse, et hactenus in Syria permanere.* Ed. PL 123, col. 26.

¹⁶ *Primus ante diluvium eas Enoch invenit, ut dicitur, septimus ab Adam. Enoch nonnullas scripsisse fertur in columpna lapidea et in columpna latericia, sicut Iosephus refert, et sic choatur, quod Enoch audiens a senioribus suis vel ab ipso Adam quod mundus duabus vindictis deleteretur per ignem aut aquam. Non tamen scivit per qualem elementum primitus deleteretur. Propter hoc construxit duas columpnas, una lapidea et alia confecta ex latere, et scripsit ibidem litteras quas invenit.* Ed. CHITTENDEN 1982, p. 9.

the first inventor of letters, before the Flood. Only direct descendants from Adam were successful in occupying this place in the apocryphal tradition of the *Vita Adae* where, nevertheless, the issues are completely different (TREFFORT 2010). In most cases, the Hebrew writing system is traced back to them. A system that is also considered the mother of Greek and Latin scripts in what seems to be a long chain of successive inventions, almost uninterrupted since antediluvian times.

The Historical Chain of Inventors

Carolingians indeed drew on several sources to present a history of writing interspersed with *inventiones* and *inventores/repertores*. Let's start with the anonymous grammatical treatise of manuscript 112 in Einsiedeln, which summarizes, in its introduction, the main stages after Enoch:

There are indeed many discoverers (*repertores*) of letters. Indeed it is said that the first one was Enoch, seventh after Adam, as can be read in an epistle to Jude: as the seventh after Adam wrote. Later, Ham, son of Noah, in anticipation of the cataclysm to come, erected two pillars, one made of marble, which would withstand water, the other made of bricks, which would endure fire, and he entrusted to both the seven liberal arts so that after the Flood, the stupidity of men could be dismissed and the penetration of spirits be stimulated. Afterwards, Moses found on Mount Sinai some other letters written by the finger of God, which lasted until the time of Esdras and are still in use among Samaritans. Then Esdras found others that were more pleasant and easier to trace (*leniores et faciliore ad scribendum*), which are used by the Jews.¹⁷

The author of the small treatise on the invention of letters attributed to Rabanus Maurus, which we will shortly discuss, also brings forth the role played by Esdras as the reformer of the alphabet after the Jews returned from their Babylonian captivity:

First of all, the characters of the Hebrew language were invented by Moses and renewed (*renovatae*) by Esdras after their captivity and return.¹⁸

Whatever their shape was, written by the finger of God (on the Tablets of Stone) or by the hand of man, the Hebrew letters were closely related to their language, considered by most early medieval Christian authors as the original language of humanity, which preceded the episode of the Tower of Babel, and had been preserved by those who had refused to participate in its construction (RESNICK 1990, pp. 55-56). Therefore, the Hebrew language and characters could, without difficulty, be considered as the origin of all others. That is what particularly Isidore of

¹⁷ *Litterarum igitur diversi repertores fuere. Primus namque Enoch septimus ab Adam litteras repperisse dicitur, unde in epistola Iudae legitur : sicut scripsit septimus ab Adam. Deinde Cham filius Noe praenoscens cataclysmum esse futurum fecit duas columnas, unam marmoream quae in aqua servaretur, et alteram latericiam quae in igne duraret, quibus septem artes liberales tradidit ut post diluvium stoliditas hominum pelleretur et acumen ingenii exercetur. Postea Moyses alias repperit litteras in monte Sinai digito Dei scriptas, quae usque ad tempora Hesdrae duraverunt, quibus nunc Samaritae utuntur. Deinde Hesdras invenit alias leniores et faciliores ad scribendum, quibus Iudaei utuntur.* Ed. HAGEN, KEIL 1961, pp. 222-223.

¹⁸ *Primo omnium litterae Hebraicae linguae a Moyse inventae sunt, et ab Esdra post illorum captivitatem et reversionem eorum renovatae sunt.* Ed. PL 112, col. 1579.

Seville elaborates in his *Etymologiae*, which had so much influence on the encyclopaedists of the following centuries:

It can be seen that Latin and Greek characters derive from the Hebrew. Among Hebrews we indeed find the Aleph, called the first; then, with the same pronunciation, alpha was traced by the Greeks; the same happened with 'a' among the Latins. The translator indeed created, based on the same sound, the letter of another language, so that we can know the Hebrew is the mother language of all others. But the Hebrews use twenty-two characters (*elementa*) as letters, according to the books of the Old Testament, the Greeks use twenty-four; the Latins, oscillating between both languages, have twenty-three characters.¹⁹

The repetition of this passage, almost to the word, by later authors, chroniclers or grammarians, ensured the status of Hebrew as the matrix language and confirmed the idea that the history of writing is, after Esdras, nothing more than a history of transfers, albeit with adaptations, from one place, people or culture to another, and always through a particular figure.

In the case of the Greek alphabet, the historical figure playing the role of inventor in early medieval texts is Cadmus/Kadmos, of whom, particularly Herodotus (trans. BARGUET 1964, pp. 379-380) and Diodorus Siculus, speak (ed. and trans. BERTRAC, VERNIÈRE 1993, p. 135). The testimony of the chroniclers is eloquent: Isidore of Seville, the Venerable Bede or Ado of Vienne, for example, insert Cadmus, king of Thebes, into their chronologies, referring to him as 'he who first invented Greek letters'.²⁰ Isidore in his *Etymologiae* (ed. PL 82, 75), and others in his wake, also evoke other traditions reported by the historian Tacitus:

The first, the Egyptians, used animal forms in order to represent ideas. Those monuments, the most ancient in human history, can still be seen, etched on stone. The Egyptians called themselves the inventors of writing and claimed that it had been transmitted from them to Greece through the Phoenicians, since they were the masters of the sea; this is how they achieved the renown of having invented something they were actually taught. Indeed, tradition shows that Cadmus, who arrived with a Phoenician fleet, brought this art to the still savage peoples of Greece. Some recount that Cecrops of Athens or Linus of Thebes or even Palamedes the Argolic, in the Trojan period, invented the first sixteen characters; then others and especially Simonides found the rest.²¹

¹⁹ *Litterae Latinae et Graecae ab Hebraeis videntur exortae. Apud illos enim prius dictum est aleph; deinde ex simili enuntiatione apud Graecos tractum est alpha; idem apud Latinos a. Translator enim ex simili sono alterius linguae litteram condidit ut nosse possimus, linguam Hebraicam omnium linguarum et litterarum esse matrem. Sed Hebraei viginti duobus elementis litterarum secundum Veteris Testamenti libros utuntur; Graeci vero viginti quatuor; Latini, inter utramque linguam progredientes, viginti tria elementa habent.* Ed. PL 82, col. 75.

²⁰ Isidore of Seville : *Cadmus regnat Thebis, qui primus Graecas litteras invenit* (ed. PL 83, col. 289) ; Bède le Vénérable : *Cadmus Thebarum rex Graecas litteras invenit* (ed. PL 90, col. 289) ; Ado of Vienne : *Hujus temporibus primo filii Israel servierunt Chusan Rasataim regi Mesopotamiae, octo annis Cadmus regnat Thebis, qui primus Graecas litteras adinvenit* (ed. PL 123, col. 36).

²¹ Tacitus, *Annales*, XI, 14 : *Primi per figuras animalium Aegypti sensus mentis effingebant (ea antiquissima monimenta memoriae humanae impressa saxis cernuntur) et litterarum semet inventores perhibent ; inde Phoenicas, quia mari praepollebant, intulisse Graeciae gloriamque adeptos, tamquam reppererint quae acceperant. Quippe fama est Cadmum classe Phoenicum vectum rudibus adhuc Graecorum populis artis ejus auctorem fuisse. Quidam Cecropem Atheniensem vel Linum Thebanum et temporibus Troianis Palamedem Argium memorant sedecim litterarum formas, mox alios ac praecipuum Simonidem ceteras repperisse.* Ed. and French trans. GOELZE 1966, pp. 289-290.

In any case, the historical vulgate of the Early Middle Ages retains the figure of Cadmus above all others, just like it does with the figure of Carmenta/Carmentis, mother of Evander, as the inventor of the Latin alphabet, (GARCEA 2002, p. 160). She is cited by numerous grammarians of the time, such as, for example, the anonymous commentator on Donatus in the manuscript 112 of Einsiedeln.²² With the addition of Abraham, regarded as the inventor of Syrian and Chaldean characters, and Queen Isis for the Egyptian characters (both less cited although occasionally present in early medieval literature), as well as Ulfilas, to whom Gothic writing is due according to several Hispanic authors as Eugene of Toledo,²³ the list of the main ‘inventors’ of alphabets is finally closed.

A Hapax Legomenon: the De inventione linguarum Attributed to Rabanus Maurus

Considering Carolingian production as a whole, one treatise stands particularly out: the work that, entitled *De inventione linguarum* (PL 112, col. 1579-1583) since the 17th century, was published in the *Patrologia latina*, resuming the edition by M. Goldast (GOLDAST, 1606). That opusculum, which unfortunately has not yet been the object of a critical edition (COUMERC 2010), presents many variants that, in turn, draw in various ways on the traditions we have just reviewed, although relating all textual developments and graphical representations to each other in order to describe, in a few paragraphs, the evolution of writing after biblical times. After recalling at the beginning of the opusculum the Hebrew, Greek and Latin alphabets, which is fairly common, the author immediately refers to more original scripts (the ‘Marcomannic runes’ and the letters of the cosmographer Aethicus of Istria, which we will discuss shortly), even cryptographic or considered as such (notes by Caesar, letters by Boniface²⁴), as well as monograms with an epigraphic vocation. G. Derolez, who, in his *Runica manuscripta*, provided a general overview of the manuscript tradition of that book, relating it to other contemporary runic testimonies (DEROLEZ 1954), clearly shed light on the variability of the text. He distinguishes between two main versions. The first (called A), whose oldest extant manuscript, from the end of the 8th century or the beginning of the 9th, is the MS 876 of the abbey of Saint Gall,²⁵ was undoubtedly used for Goldast’s edition (GOLDAST 1606); the second version (called B) is also present in many manuscripts –the oldest among which date back to the 10th century.²⁶ Both versions meet

²² *Latinorum quoque litteras Carmentis nympha Nicostrata mater Evandri invenit.* Ed. HAGEN, KEIL 1961, pp. 222-223. We also find another mention to her in MSS Bern 207 (*Latinas litteras repperit Carmentis nimpha Nicostrata, mater Evandri, quae dividuntur in duas partes principaliter apud Latinos*), ed. ibid. p. XVI or Bern 417 (*Apud Graecos Cathmus invenit litteras, qui regnavit in Thebeis. Apud Latinos Carmentis nimfa Nicostrata mater Evandri*), ed. ibid. pp. LII-LIII.

²³ XXXIX – *De inventoribus litterarum. Moyses primus Hebraeas exaravit litteras, / mente Phoenices sagaci condiderunt Atticas ; / quas Latini scriptitamus, edidit Nicostrata, / Abraam Syras et idem repperit Chaldaicas ; / Isis arte non minori protulit Aegyptias, / Gulfila promsit Getarum quas videmus ultimas.* Ed. MGH, SS, XIV, p. 257).

²⁴ Systems consisting in the replacement of a vowel by another or by a certain number of points.

²⁵ Saint-Gall, Stiftsbibliothek, MS 876, pp. 278-281.

²⁶ Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS lat. 5239, fol. 235r-236r and Strasbourg, Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire, MS 326, fol. 109v-110r.

again in the presentation of the letters by Aethicus and the runes. About the first, the author –probably a member of the circle of Rabanus Maurus rather than himself– wrote:

We have also discovered the letters of the philosopher Aethicus, a cosmographer of Scythian origin, which have been transmitted to us by the accounts of the venerable Jerome, the priest, since he highly valued his science and talent; he therefore wanted to make his letters known. If we have made mistakes with these characters, and committed errors in some of them, please correct them.²⁷

Aethicus' *Cosmographia*, placed under the apocryphal authority of Saint Jerome, was actually, in all likelihood, a work composed in the first half of the 8th century in the Frankish milieu (HERREN 2011, p. LXVI). Several extant manuscripts have in fact traces of the signs presented as characters; a system completely created from scratch, the use of which seems to be limited to certain erudite colophons.²⁸ The reception of this fictitious alphabet within the treatise attributed to Rabanus Maurus is still more interesting since it is related to the runic script, about which he writes:

We have transcribed below the letters used by the Marcomanni, whom we call Normans, used by those who speak the Theodiscus. Those who still practice pagan rites use them to confer meaning on their chants, incantations and divinations.²⁹

The drawings that follow this brief passage show Anglo-Saxon runes, arrived at the continent either with the missionaries or with Alcuin, with whom Rabanus Maurus studied (DEROLEZ 1954, p. 281). In any case, the presence in this treatise of the letters of the Scythian Aethicus and the Marcomannic runes undoubtedly reveals a concern –that of the contact between the *regnum Francorum* and a variety of cultures– that is more contemporary than the invention of the Hebrew, Greek or Latin alphabets, although this issue was still of considerable concern to them.

The history of the *inventores litterarum* shows, in many ways, the extreme interest of Carolingians in writing, a formulaic system of human origin, closely related to a culture and a language, able to be transferred, adapted and transformed according to necessity. The amount and diversity of texts glorifying this conception of writing, as well as the initial place these developments occupy within grammatical treatises, certainly made this conception very familiar to literate Carolingians: in a sort of daily pervasion, this conception, coupled with the official instructions of the sovereign, could have sustained the formidable movement of reform of writing and language undertaken by Charlemagne and his successors.

²⁷ *Litteras enim Aethici philosophi et cosmographi natione Scythica nobili prosapia invenimus quas venerabilis Hieronymus presbyter ad nos usque cum suis dictis explanando perduxit, quia magnifice illius scientiam atque industriam duxit ; ideo et eius litteras maluit promulgare. In istis adhuc litteris [si] fallimur et in aliquibus vitium agimus vos emendate.* Ed. PL 112, col. 1579-1580.

²⁸ For example, Amiens, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 59(52), fol. 28 (Agambertus).

²⁹ *Litteras quippe quibus utuntur Marcomanni, quos nos Nordmannos vocamus, infra scriptas habemus (a quibus originem qui Theodiscam loquuntur linguam trahunt) ; cum quibus carmina sua incantationesque ac divinationes significare procurant, qui adhuc pagano ritu involvuntur.* Ed. PL 112, col. 1581-1582.

List of abbreviations

PL: *Patrologia latina*.

MGH: *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*

Capit.: *Capitularia*

Poet. Lat.: *Poetae Latini*

RM: *Rerum merovingiarum*

SS: *Scriptores*

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