WEAVING WITH WORDS VENANTIUS FORTUNATUS'S FIGURATIVE ACROSTICS ON THE HOLY CROSS

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Within the collected works of Venantius Fortunatus, the sixth-century Latin poet who wrote verse for kings, royal officials, bishops, and nuns in Frankish Gaul, there are found three acrostic poems. One, on the themes of captivity and release (5.6) is accompanied by a prose letter (5.6a) in which the poet discusses his methods in composing this work, which he intended for decorative display on a wall. The other two acrostics are written on the theme of the Holy Cross (2.4; 2.5). This paper, which offers a new interpretation of the figurative acrostics on the Holy Cross, begins first by examining the compositional strategies discussed by Fortunatus in 5.6a and his use there of the extended metaphor of weaving for the composition of acrostic poetry. The paper then moves to a wider discussion of weaving as a metaphor in Fortunatus's poetry before exploring how the poet played with metaphors and materiality, particularly in those instances when he was writing verse intended to be actually placed on material objects or sent with them. It finally goes on to argue, on the basis of indications within the acrostic poems on the Holy Cross themselves and much circumstantial evidence external to them, that these poems (2.4; 2.5) were written for public display in the chapel of the Holy Cross convent at Poitiers. It argues that these acrostics were most probably intended as textile designs for church vela or "hangings."

The Latin poet Venantius Fortunatus (ca.530–600) wrote over 300 poems.[1] Fortunatus was trained in the rhetorical schools of Ravenna, and his considerable output[2] is evidence of his skill in the production of set-piece works in the standard

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[1] For the poet's background, career, and literary output see Michael Roberts, *The Humblest Sparrow: The Poetry of Venantius Fortunatus* (Ann Arbor, 2009); Judith George, *Venantius Fortunatus: A Latin Poet in Merovingian Gaul* (Oxford, 1992); Brian Brennan, "The Career of Venantius Fortunatus," *Traditio* 41 (1985): 50–78.

[2] All references to the poetry of Venantius Fortunatus are to the book, poem number, and lines in the edition of Friedrich Leo, MGH Auctores antiquissimi 4.1. Fortunatus's metrical *Vita Sancti Martini* henceforth cited as VSM. References to *the Libri historiarum* of Gregory of Tours are to the edition of B. Krusch and W. Levison, MGH Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum, hereafter SRM, 1.1, and the history cited hereafter as *LH*. References to Gregory's *miracula* are to the edition by B. Krusch, MGH SRM 1.2, and are cited hereafter as

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literary genres such as *panegyricus*, *epithalamium*, and *consolatio*, and his works reveal a familiarity with the great poets, both pagan and Christian. Fortunatus's collected works contain metrical epitaphs to be carved on graves, *tituli* to be painted above wall paintings, verse to be engraved on church plate, and three acrostic poems. A figurative acrostic poem on the theme of redemption by Christ and the freeing of a captive by Bishop Syagrius of Autin has come down to us complete with its central figure of a snare (5.6a), together with a prose letter written by Fortunatus to Syagrius about the poem (5.6). This letter is essential to our understanding of Fortunatus's acrostics, for it contains a great deal of valuable information about Fortunatus's compositional technique in writing acrostics. The two other acrostic poems (2.4; 2.5) that are the subject of this paper were written in promotion of the cult of the Holy Cross that developed strongly in sixth-century Gaul as a consequence of the arrival in Poitiers in AD 569 of a relic of the True Cross.

Before we are able to turn to a consideration of the figurative acrostics on the Holy Cross, we must begin with an examination of the prose letter (5.6) that Fortunatus sent to Bishop Syagrius prefacing his acrostic poem on the captivity and release (5.6a). This letter sheds much light on Fortunatus's compositional technique. Both this letter and the poem itself allow us to appreciate better what the poet sought to achieve also in his acrostics on the Holy Cross (2.4; 2.5). However, since we know nothing of the chronology of these three works, we should not infer that the poem for Syagrius was written later than those written on the Holy Cross just because of their relative placement in the poet's collected works.

The Acrostic Poem for Syagrius and Its Covering Letter

Fortunatus was much influenced by the handbooks that provided students with set-piece models in the standard genres for them to follow. In late antiquity, figurative and acrostic poems were greatly appreciated as vehicles for the virtuosic display both of a poet's intense industry and of his audacious ingenuity in overcoming the difficulties inherent in the form he had chosen. Fortunatus's acrostic poems show him to be an heir to this highly developed literary tradition that goes back to late antiquity and ultimately to earlier Hellenistic models that we glimpse in the tenth-century compilation of Greek poetry and epigrams now known as the *Palatine Anthology*. The tradition is known to us primarily through the works of

follows: *De gloria confessorum* = *GC*; *Liber in gloria martyrum* = *GM*; *Liber vitae patrum* = *LP*; *Libri de virtutibus sancti Martini* = *VM*. References to the two lives of Radegund are to the edition by B.Krusch, MGH SRM 2, cited hereafter as follows: Fortunatus, *Vita Radegundis* = Fortunatus, *VR;* Baudonivia, *Vita Radedundis* = Baudonivia, *VR*. All translations of the poetry of Venantius Fortunatus are mine.

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Porphyrius Optatianus, who wrote in the time of Constantine. Optatian constructed works of a most bizarre and intriguing complexity including figurative poems that depicted such things as pan-pipes, an altar, a ship, and a water organ, their shapes picked out by letters written in colored ink. The most elaborate of these also incorporated acrostic verse.[3] Such productions are best categorized as "iconotextual," the term suggested by Peter Wagner for describing "written texts that are iconically depicted" in which "verbal and visual signs mingle to produce rhetoric that depends on the copresence of words and images."[4]

The letter that Fortunatus wrote to Bishop Syagrius of Autun reveals that the poet had sought the bishop's help on behalf of a person whose son was being held for ransom. Bishop Syagrius is implored to pay the ransom money that would set the man free and the poet offers him by way of his own "payment" a figurative acrostic poem of 33 lines "adtendens quae fuerint tempora redemptoris, quoto nos suae aetatis anno Christus absolverit" (5.6.8) (Being mindful of the lifetime of the Redeemer and his age in years when he freed us).

Taking his cue from the circumstances of the enslaved man seeking his release from his captivity, Fortunatus built his figurative poem on the criss-cross visual pattern of a snare and on the theme of Christ's ransoming of mankind. When he wrote figurative acrostics, Fortunatus expected the patrons for whom he wrote to appreciate the difficulty of his task, the constraints he had accepted, and the ingenuity with which he solved lexical and metrical problems. Within his letter to Syagrius, for example, the poet claims inexperience in the writing of this type of work and elaborates on the technical difficulties he imposed upon himself by the adoption of a thirty-three-line/letter length of the square. Despite Fortunatus's claims of inexperience in writing figurative poems, it would seem that he was well acquainted with the tradition and influenced by Optatian's works.[5]

Fortunatus pictured himself as the "incautious sparrow" (5.6. prose letter, 11) who had inadvertently ensnared himself in the rectilinear acrostic net that he was himself creating: "you fix in place the letter, and you cannot flee it" (5.6. prose letter, 11). The restrictions, lexical, grammatical, and metrical, created by the need to correctly mesh with the *versus intexti*, as mesostich, telostich, and

[3] William Levitan, "Dancing at the End of the Rope: Optatian Porfyry and the Field of Roman Verse," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 115 (1985): 245–69; Giovanni Polara, "Le parole nella pagina: Grafica e contenuti nei carmi figurati latini," *Vetera Christianorum* 28 (1991): 291–336. See Polara's edition of Optatian (Turin, 1973).

[4] Peter Wagner, ed., *Icons–Texts–Iconotexts: Essays on Ekphrasis and Intermediality* (Berlin, 1996), 16.

[5] See Margaret Graver, "Quaelibet Audendi: Fortunatus and the Acrostic," *Transactions of the American Philological Society* 123 (1993): 219–45: Giuseppe Pipitone, "Tra Optaziano Porfirio e Venanzio Fortunato: Nota intorno alla lettera a Siagrio," *Revue des études tardo-antiques* 1 (2011): 119–27.

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parastichy, were such that they literally tied him up (5.6 prose letter, 10). This poem on the snare (5.6a) with certain letters colored red to make the pattern (in contrast to the other letters, which were black) had a colorful aspect. Fortunatus, heir to a long poetic tradition equating poetry and weaving, spoke of his acrostic as a "weaving."

The metaphor of weaving is particularly apposite to the construction of a figurative acrostic in a square, as 33 X 33 letters (5.6a) or 35 X 35 letters (2.4; 2.5). The hand drawloom is constructed with a wooden frame — side posts and horizontal crossbars top and bottom. The longitudinal fibers are first tied tightly to the crossbars top and bottom and constitute the warp threads. Alternate longitudinal warp threads are separated by hand or by another moveable crossbar to allow each horizontal weft thread to be passed between them. When the last weft thread is in place, the finished work is cut from the wooden frame and its edges tied or sewn into the back of the fabric.

In the construction of a metrical figurative acrostic, the lines that make the framing lines on four sides and the central figure would have been worked out first and be the first "threads" woven. All the other threads had to align metrically and syntactically. As the poet told Syagrius:

> Littera vero quae tinguitur in descendenti versiculo, et tenetur in uno et currit in altero et, ut ita dicatur, et stat pro stamine et pro trama currit in tramite, ut esse potest in pagina: licia litterata. (5.6 prose letter,15)
>
> Indeed any letter that is dyed in the descending verse is held fast in the one and runs crossways in the other; it both stands upright, so to speak, as the warp, and runs crosswise as the weft — so that it might be, as far as it is possible on the page, a lettered loom.

The Metaphor of Weaving

In a tradition that stretched back to the Greeks, weaving was a long-established metaphor for the production of poetry.[6] From the Latin expression *deducere filum*, to draw down fiber from an amorphous lump of carded wool, attenuate it, and make it fine and knot-free for spinning, came the commonly used figurative expression *deducere carmen*. The poet likewise plucks out his fibers from an amorphous tangle of words and inchoate literary ideas. These he skilfully attenuates, forming them into the continuous thread with which he may weave his poem.[7]

[6] A great deal of the richness of this long and complex tradition is explored in *Spinning Fates and the Song of the Loom: The Use of Textiles, Clothing and Cloth Production as Metaphor, Symbol and Narrative Device in Greek and Latin Literature*, ed. Giovanni Fanfani, Mary Harlow, and Marie-Louise Nosch (Oxford, 2016).

[7] Some few examples only of the common figurative usage: Ov. *Met.*1.4; *Tr.*1.1.39; Hor. *Epist.* 2.1.225; Cic. *Cael.*18.

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Fortunatus, in his letter to Syagrius, casts himself as the *artifex* who was roused from an unproductive torpor by urgent circumstances that now compel him to resume his work. Whereas previously "nihil velleretur ex vellere quod carminaretur in carmine" (5.6 prose letter, 1) (Nothing was being plucked from the fleece that might be carded into a poem), now, due to an urgent need, Fortunatus has become productive. After this initial reference to plucking and carding of wool he moves to the spinning of the threads and the weaving of a poem made up of the number of lines and letters of Christ's age at which he concluded the span of his life by his death on the cross and thus *nos … absolverit* (5.6 prose letter, 8) (He freed us). The verb *absolvere* refers to Christ's breaking of the bonds of sin, just as Bishop Syagrius has freed the captive from his restraints. The verb also recalls the releasing of a thread in weaving, when, at the completion of the work, the longitudinal warp threads are cut, thus detaching the finished work from the frame of the loom (*telam absolvere*). The verb is used also to allude to the finishing of Fortunatus's literary work that had been woven and finally concluded as well. Significantly it is followed shortly afterwards by the poet's description of the difficulty of his task: "in quo quippe exordio supercrescente apice non licuit vel solvere vel fila laxare, ne numerum transiliens erratica se tela turbaret" (5.6 prose letter, 8) (Indeed in this warp it was not possible to release or loosen even one superfluous letter, lest a roaming thread, skipping over, might disturb the measure). The task is onerous and Fortunatus notes that the threads break both themselves, and him as well (5.6 prose letter, 10).

From the "incautious sparrow" tangled by his own *pinna* (plume) in the perilous net that he had himself created, the poet finally emerges as the skillraful weaver (5.6.16). Fortunatus probably avoided any comparison of himself to a spider and its web because he was well aware of Ovid's cautionary tale of the proud Arachne who in *Metamorphoses* book 6, dared to challenge Minerva to a weaving contest and was turned into a spider.[8] Fortunatus preferred to suggest that he was an *artifex* like Oholiab (Exod. 38:23; 39:1) who had used blue, purple, and scarlet yarn to make a priestly garment. However the poet tells Bishop Syagrius that because he lacked scarlet he had to use red instead: "unde, cum desit hic coccinum, res est texta de minio" (5.6 prose letter, 16). (Because there was no scarlet here, the actual thing itself has been woven with red.)

[8] Max Manitius, in his appendix to Leo's edition, lists Fortunatus's reminiscences of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in both his poems and metrical *Vita Martini*: 2.7.38 Ov. *Met*. 15. 532; 2.9.59 Ov. *Met*. 15. 458; 3.7.47 Ov. *Met*. 14.752; 3.10.23 Ov. *Met*.3. 110; 6.10.44 Ov. *Met*.13.123; 7.1.1 Ov. *Met*. 10. 145; 8. 3.201 Ov. *Met*. 1.167; 9.7.53 Ov. *Met*. 4.616; 10.9.35 Ov. *Met*. 4.777; *VSM* 3. 124 Ov. *Met*. 2. 205; *VSM* 4. 231 Ov. *Met*. 10. 608; *VSM* 4. 499 Ov. *Met*. 6.145; *VSM* 4. 605 Ov. *Met*. 9.175. See also Sven Blomgren, "De locis Ovidii a Venantio Fortunato expressis," *Eranos* 79 (1981): 82–85.

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Fortunatus's "weaving" for Bishop Syagrius was both a poem and a picture that the poet hoped might be displayed on a wall at the entrance to the episcopal residence. Thus the poet alerts the bishop to the possibilities inherent in Horace's assertion that "pictoribus atque poetis / quaelibet audendi semper fuit aequa potestas" (5.6 prose letter, 7 quoting Horace *Ars Poetica* 9–10) (Poets and painters have always had equal power to venture on whatever they choose). Fortunatus produced the very work that seems to be called forth by Horace's "ut pictura poesis."[9] Thus Fortunatus told Syagrius:

> Considerans versiculum, si quae vult artifex permiscet uterque, cur non, etsi non ab artifice, misceantur utraque, ut ordiretur una tela simul poesis et pictura? (5.6 prose letter, 7)
>
> Considering this verse, I wondered if each artist mixes together whatever he wants, why should the methods of both of them not be intermingled, even if not by an artist, so that one single web be set up, at the same time both a poem and a picture?

This was not a poem written to be heard. It was designed as an iconotext that contains within the one frame, both lines that might read as paths of discovery and a visual patterning of letters that was to be encountered by a viewer as an iconic sign.

The Metaphor of Weaving Elsewhere in Fortunatus's Poetry

In this section of the paper Fortunatus's employment of the metaphor of weaving is examined in order to establish how significant were textiles and weaving in the poet's visual aesthetic. The "weaving" that Fortunatus speaks of in his letter to Syagrius is clearly metaphoric because the *artifex* has produced a text that he says is designed to be painted, not made into a textile. However the metaphor of weaving is regularly employed throughout Fortunatus's poetry in a variety of contexts, and fine textiles and woven clothing often appear to catch his eye (9.2.125).

Like the late antique poet Claudian (ca. 370–404),[10] whose works he knew well, Fortunatus is particularly alert to fine clothing as a signifier of rank and status. Heaven, in Fortunatus's poems, is filled with the saints whose status and sanctity is indicated by fine clothes and fabrics, and he introduces many descriptions of clothing that was woven (8.3.275; 9.2.124–25), brightly colored (8.3.275; 8.4.9–10; *VSM* 2.450–53), or adorned with jeweled belts (9.2.127–28; *VSM* 3. 466). In Fortunatus's metrical *Vita Martini* imperial splendor is evoked in an ekphrasis

[9] Hor. *Ars P.* 361.

[10] Claud. *Prob.* 177–84; IV *Cons. Hon.* 585–95; VI *Cons. Hon.* 560–64; II *Cons. Stil.* 88–94; 339–61.

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that includes a splendid fabric woven with flowers that covers the dining room sideboard of the emperor Maximus, purple cloth woven with gold thread that drapes the couches, and jewel-adorned hangings that decorate the room (*VSM* 2.86–90).

Reflecting the literary traditions, both Greek and Latin, Fortunatus shows a strong inclination to the employment of metaphors linking weaving to poetry to express unity or totality. In his description of Bishop Germanus processing with clergy and choir at Paris, Fortunatus employs a floral weaving metaphor to unite the clergy, young and old, in a picture of consensus. Some priests are white of hair, some deacons wear white, some are pale of complexion, others ruddy faced, and Fortunatus describes them all united as a wreath or circle of contrasting colors composed of white lilies intermixed with red roses (2.9.23–26) as they surround the bishop. The clothes of the clergy are indicated in lines 23 and 25, and the splendid garments of the Old Testament priesthood are contrasted with Germanus who shines (lines 33–34) not because of his clothing but because of his piety. The verb *trahit* used at 2.9.30 to indicate Germanus's "drawing on" of the procession was commonly used in weaving to indicate the passing of the horizontal weft threads between the longitudinal warp threads. The verb *trahit* returns at line 54, here as part of the construction of a metaphor of weaving, used to represent both the intertwining of words and music and interweaving of the treble and bass registers in the music of the clerical choir, composed of boys and men. The words of the psalter are the warp threads (*stamina*) that are woven (*texens*) with music (*lyrico modulamine*) to make a tapestry. Fortunatus employed the verb *ordior* in his letter to Bishop Syagrius, "ut ordiretur una tela" (5.6 prose letter 7), to indicate the setting up of the loom to create a woven product. This is exactly what he is suggesting of the choir here (2.9.53–54).

In a different context, in Fortunatus's poem on the destruction of Thuringia, where he catalogues the sufferings of that defeated people, the totality of the carnage wrought by the Franks on the battlefield is expressed by the ghastly metaphor of a colorful weaving. The milk-white bodies of the Thuringian royal attendants, with their gold-red hair spread out, carpet (*texerunt*) the field (Appendix 1.15–17).

As we have seen, in the letter to Syagrius (5.6), Fortunatus was quick to use the metaphor of weaving to explain the technical challenges of writing acrostic poetry. He claims he had been indolent because he lacked a subject that he could turn into poetry and he alludes to the carding process as a preparation for weaving (5.6.1). Similarly, in the *propempticon ad libellum* that ends his metrical *Vita Martini*, Fortunatus, addressing the book, employs the metaphor of weaving in a modesty *topos* based on the deficiencies of his poetic yarn, which is unfit for his subject, Martin:

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Pone, libelle, modum, trepido verecunde relatu;
multiplices faciens dissuto stamine rugas
nec bene fila ligans nodo subit aspera tela,
hispida, cameli rigido quasi vellere texta.
serica cum decuit Martini pallia duci
aut praetexta micans auro tortile necti
vel toga permixtis hyacinthina cucurrit[11] albis. (*VSM* 4.621–27)

Lay aside, O little book, disconcerted by my disjointed narration. The thread having been unraveled is making many rucks and the disjointed fibers with their knots make a rough cloth like that carded from harsh camel hair, whereas it was fitting for Martin to be given a silken cloak with a border shining with an interweave of twisted gold thread or a toga where ran hyacinth, intermixed with white pearls.

Metaphor and Materiality

In the section above, the poet's clear interest in the long-established metaphor of weaving a poetic work has been demonstrated. The following section of the paper seeks to illustrate how, on occasion, Fortunatus was apt to use the actual material objects — a silver bowl, a chalice, a wall hanging, a floral arrangement, a woven basket, or a handmade gift — that were the subject of his poems as the starting point for a metaphorical elaboration. Indeed, the poet appears fascinated with correspondences between the metaphoric and the material and he playfully manipulates both on many occasions, as if rejoicing in the ambiguities that he creates. The metaphoric elaboration in a poem may allude very specifically to actual material qualities of an artistic object or creation.

Horace noted that the work of poets was generally underappreciated by the less discerning, who valued the material products of artists and sculptors more highly. To Augustus he lamented that "our labors are not apparent and our poems are spun out in fine thread."[12] For his part, Fortunatus, on a number of occasions, used the production of verse that was closely related to material objects as an

[11] The printed text established by Leo has the third-person singular imperfect active subjunctive *curreret* in line 627, but in the apparatus he raises the possibility of *currere et*. The most recent editor of the text, Solange Quesnel, *Venance Fortunat, Œuvres*, Tome IV, *La Vie de Saint Martin* (Paris, 2002), 168 note 78, suggests that Leo may have been drawn to this solution because of Fortunatus's use of infinitives nearby in the text: *duci* line 625, *necti* line 626, and *pingere* line 628. I propose instead the third-person singular perfect active indicative *cucurrit* and suggest that Fortunatus, here in his description of Martin's cloak, may have been influenced by the description of the prize cloak in Verg. *Aen*. 5.250–51: "victori chlamydem auratam, quam plurima circum / purpura maeandro duplici Meliboea cucurrit."

[12] Hor. *Epist*. 2. 224–25: "cum lamentamur non apparere labores / nostros et tenui deducta poemata filo."

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opportunity to self-consciously make himself manifest, on a metapoetical level, as a poet artificer.

Fortunatus's interest in material objects is seen, for example, in the verse that he provided to be engraved on church plate (1.14) and fine tableware (7.24 a, b, c, d, e, f, g). These poems that were designed to be incised into the metal are significant, for they illustrate how Fortunatus's poetry became an integral part of those actual physical objects to which they allude.

In the case of a silver table bowl in 7.24a, the poet's address to the diner draws upon two biblical texts, Malachi 3 and 1 Peter 7, to expatiate on different kinds of material and metaphoric "refining." Fortunatus draws attention to the materiality of the pure silver object proved in the furnace and the metaphoric "proving or refining" of the believer (7.24a). Further, his own words, written in the beautiful and pure metal, are obviously also a part of the product (*opus*), as they also have been tested and purified, both in the making of the object and, metaphorically, in the furnace of poetic composition. Similarly, a poem on an actual chalice offered to an unspecified church by Bishop Leontius of Bordeaux and his wife Placidina appears to have borne verse by Fortunatus. The text to be engraved on the chalice would imply that the poet included himself with the donors and the metalworker, amongst those whose "labor est altaribus aptus" (1.14.3–4) (work fit for the altars).

When Fortunatus, at some stage in the course of his travels, paid a visit to Bishop Vilicus at Metz on the Moselle, he wrote a series of poems, replete with metaphor, flattering his host (3.13; 13a; 13b; 13c; 13d). Here we are concerned with poem 3.13c, which comes down to us with a title that indicates the verse was spoken by the poet on the occasion of a meal: "De pictura vitis in mensa eius dictum" (3.13c title) (On a picture of a vine, spoken at his [Bishop Vilicus's] table). In 3.13c, Fortunatus first describes the tapestry on the wall of the house of bishop Vilicus of Metz, which showed a bird flourishing among the vine tendrils. The tendrils of the vines recall the threads of a weave: "vitibus intextis ales sub palmite vernat" (3.13c.1) (Within the interwoven vines a bird flourishes under a tendril). The bird that is depicted banquets on the pictured grapes (3.13.c.2). As if to underscore the simultaneous physical reality of both the tapestry and the real banquet, the poet observes of the guest at the bishop's table: "aspicit hinc uvas, inde falerna bibit" (3.13c.4). (Here he sees the grapes, thereupon he drinks the Falerian wine). Further, we are meant to appreciate as well, on a metapoetic level, that Fortunatus's poem, like the vines' tendrils on the hills and the threads of the tapestry, has brought together both artful depiction and the reality of the moment at the table.

Actual artistic arrangements of flowers are described in two poems written for the nuns Radegund and Agnes (8.7; 11.11), and in both instances Fortunatus, unlike in 2.9.23–26, employs a metaphor of weaving that is entirely apposite to

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what were real floral displays. Such a comparison between weaving and the intertwining of flowers, of different colors and expressive of symbolic meanings, has a long tradition going back to the Hellenistic period. It was, of course, common practice amongst the Greeks and Romans to weave crowns and garlands of vines and flowers, to decorate doorways with foliage, and to deck temples and altars with garlands. An Easter floral poem (8.7) was written for the nuns Radegund and Agnes at Poitiers and its opening lines (8.7.1–6), which treat the verdant Paschal renewal of the natural world, recalls the Easter poem that Fortunatus wrote for Bishop Felix of Nantes (3.9.1–34). The pious nuns collect flowers not for their own pleasure, but for the altar where they become an Easter offering to Christ (8.7.7).

Here again we see that Fortunatus speaks metaphorically of a material subject: floral arrangements at Easter. This may be presented metaphorically as a "weaving," but the real-life practice of intertwining flowers in crowns and garlands at Easter is well attested. In this poem Fortunatus's description of the colors and scents of the flowers is grounded in the reality of the occasion:

> Texistis variis altaria festa coronis,
> pingitur ut filis floribus ara novis. (8.7.9–10)
>
> You have cloaked the festive altar with multicolored wreathes,
> decorated it with fresh floral fibers.

Yet on a metaphoric level the flowers also recall the fields of flowers that elsewhere in Fortunatus's poetry characterize his depictions of heaven (2.7.49–50; 2.16.14–16; 8.4.11–12) or that he uses to suggest the *locus amoenus* of the Virgin Mary (8.3.25–30), and also of Venus (6.1.60–65).

On a metapoetic level the poem is also about Fortunatus imaginatively "making" his own floral arrangement because in his verse he is intertwining the flowers in a metaphoric battle that he, but not the nuns, imagines. The yellow crocus, the purple violet, together with red, white, or blue flowers are all arranged by the poet and set by him in a *herbida bella*. This metaphor then allows Fortunatus to construct the paradox that the church, a place of peace, is now a battlefield:

> Stat prasino venetus, pugnant et flore colores
> inque loco pacis herbida bella putas. (8.7.13–14)
>
> Blue stands firm against green and the colors contend in a floral fight; you would think there is a botanical war in a place of peace.

Another poem (11.11), which is introduced by the opening address to the *felix conviva*, depicts a flower-strewn table in a banqueting setting. In this occasional poem Fortunatus then goes on to employ the metaphor of weaving to describe

what was clearly an actual table decoration. The table becomes a veritable flowery field inside the room (11.11.4) and the flowers take the place of a cloth (11.11.9–10). The nun who makes the floral arrangement with Daedalic skill becomes a textile artisan (11.11.17–18). Here again the starting point for Fortunatus's metaphoric excursus is the material reality of the entwined flowers on a table.

We also have a self-consciously rustic poem where Fortunatus sends to Radegund and Agnes a gift of a wicker basket containing chestnuts from his own tree, and a poem elaborating on this woven gift (11.13). Fortunatus, who had been given by Gregory of Tours the use of a small farm (8.19; 8.20; 9.6.10–12), often affected the pose of the productive poet-gardener (8.6; 8.8; 8.10; 8.21; 11.13; 11.18; Appendix 9; Appendix 18). Thus, in 11.13, he has woven both the basket for the chestnuts and likewise the poem sent with it. The basket that he wove "meis manibus," and the poem that he produced and apparently wrote out (11.13.1–4), and not just the chestnuts from his own tree, should all be taken together as constituting the "rustica dona" that he sends. Fortunatus's making of the woven basket serves to materialize the process of his "woven" poetic composition sent with it.[13]

Small gifts of violets (8.6.9–10) or sweet fruits (Appendix 26.5–6) were sent by Fortunatus, the poet-gardener, wrapped in the very page on which his accompanying poem was written.[14] Indeed, on one occasion, he suggests the common materiality of the poem that he sent as well as a hand-prepared gift: "Composui propriis manibus hoc munus amoris" (11.17.1) (I have composed/prepared with my own hands this gift of love). The verb *compono*, which, of course, may indicate a variety of actions involving preparation, arrangement, setting together, and connecting, was used by Propertius, Ovid, and Horace in relation to the composition of poetry.[15] Fortunatus employs the verb to make more visible the poet's labor, which was not just in preparing the material gifts with his hands but also in arranging and connecting the words of his poem and even writing the poem with his own hands.

[13] In Ver. G.4.116–46, the gardener stands for the poet himself and his poetic production. I am much influenced here by William Fitzgerald, "Labor and Laborer in Latin Poetry: The Case of the *Moretum*," *Arethusa* 29 (1996): 389–418, and especially at 411, where he refers to farm work and the careful blending of the cheesy *moretum*: "the process of manual labour also serves to materialize the process of writing itself."

[14] Note the conjunction of the material and the metaphoric in Hor. *Epist.* 2.1.268–70 where he suggests that if he wrote unsuccessful sycophantic poetry it would end up, quite appropriately, as the waste paper used as the wrapping for incense, scents, or pepper down in the street market.

[15] Used of the writing of poetry: Prop. 1.7.19; Ov. *Tr.* 5.12.60; Hor. *Sat.* 1.4.8; 2.1.63; 2.1.63; *Epist.* 2.177; 2.2.91; and more generally of other writing Ov. *Met.* 9.521; Cic. *Mur.* 12. 26; *De Or.* 3.43. 171.

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Given Fortunatus's practice of sometimes playing with the material and the metaphorical, it will be argued below that the two acrostic poems on the Holy Cross (2.4; 2.5) were possibly intended as textile designs for decorative liturgical veils, for the Convent of the Holy Cross at Poitiers, and that both poems allude to veils/sails in a metaphoric way that may also draw upon the materiality of the actual cloths on which the poems were intended (perhaps) to be displayed.

In what was a diplomatic maneuver that demonstrated her prestige, the royal nun Radegund had obtained the relic, encased in a sumptuous reliquary, from the Emperor Justin II and the Empress Sophia, for her convent at Poitiers.[16] Fortunatus, who benefited from the literary patronage of the powerful and influential Radegund, is believed to have written the two great processional hymns *Vexilla regis prodeunt* (2.6) and *Pange lingua* (2.2) for the liturgical reception of the relic of the cross.[17] To the donors, the Emperor Justin II and the Empress Sophia in Byzantium, Fortunatus sent, on behalf of Radegund, an elaborate poem of thanks that cast the imperial couple as a new Constantine and Helena, and ascribed their prosperity to their fervent devotion to the cross.[18]

It will be argued in the final section of this paper that the two acrostics on the Holy Cross (2.4; 2.5) were possibly written as textiles designs for the decoration of the convent chapel at Poitiers where the relic of the cross was housed. However in their manuscript form these two acrostic poems like the Holy Cross hymns also traveled far and contributed to the promotion of the cult of the cross in the Carolingian age. These poems also later exerted a major influence on writers such as Alcuin and Hrabanus Maurus who, following Fortunatus, also produced *carmina figurata* on the Holy Cross, in the Carolingian period.[19] The extant

[16] Gregory of Tours, *LH* 9. 40; Baudonivia, *Vita Radegundis*, 16. On the translation of the relics see Isabel Moreira, "*Provisatrix optima*: St. Radegund of Poitiers' Relic Petitions to the East," *Journal of Medieval History* 19 (1993): 285–305. The reliquary currently in the Convent of the Holy Cross, Poitiers, does not date to the sixth century. See David Buckton, "Byzantine Enamels in the Twentieth Century," in *Byzantine Style, Religion and Civilisation*, ed. Elizabeth M. Jeffreys (Cambridge, 2012), 25–37 at 29–31. The jewel-encrusted cross reliquary sent to Pope John III by the Emperor Justin II and the Empress Sophia between 565 and 578 is the best guide to what the reliquary at Poitiers may have looked like. The sixth-century date for most of that reliquary still held in the Treasury of St. Peter's basilica was established in 2009 by Sante Guido who undertook the restoration: *La Crux Vaticana o Croce di Giustino II* (Vatican City, 2013), 12–33.

[17] Charles Witke, "The Roman Norm in Merovingian and Carolingian Latin Poetry," in *Saints, Scholars and Heroes: Studies in Medieval Culture in Honour of Charles W. Jones*, ed. M. H. King and W. M. Stevens (Collegeville, 1979), 2:1–26.

[18] *Carm.* Appendix 2, *Ad Iustinum et Sophiam Augustos*, 65–72.

[19] See Ulrich Ernst, *Carmen Figuratum: Geschichte des Figurengedichts von den antiken Ursprüngen bis zum Ausgang des Mittelalters* (Cologne, 1991), 150–55; Hans Bernhard Meyer, "*Crux, Decus es mundi*," in *Paschatis sollemnia: Studien zu Osterfeier und Osterfrömmigkeit*, ed. B. Fischer and J. Wagner (Freiburg,1959), 96–107.

manuscripts are all Carolingian and we will now turn to an examination of these manuscripts before moving on to an analysis of the poems.

The Manuscripts of Fortunatus's Holy Cross Acrostics

Fortunatus's only complete figurative poem on the Holy Cross (2.4), a 35-by-35 line acrostic, survives in five of the fifteen extant Carolingian manuscripts of the *Carmina*.[20] Another acrostic poem, also a 35-by-35 letter square (2.5) on the Holy Cross, appears incomplete in each of the four extant Carolingian manuscripts of the *Carmina* that include it.[21] All of the extant manuscripts of 2.5 contain only five lines of horizontal text and break off at exactly the same point, which suggests either that Fortunatus never completed 2.5 and abandoned it, or that there was some early break in the transmission of the full text. Five of the extant Carolingian manuscripts that include the figurative acrostics on the Holy Cross also contain the figurative acrostic (5.6a) written for Bishop Syagrius of Autun, on the theme of deliverance from captivity and featuring a figure of a snare.[22]

All but one of the extant manuscripts of Fortunatus's figurative acrostics on the Holy Cross feature a rubrication of the *versus intexti* making up the central figure and the framing borders, contrasting with a black, or in one case a brown, word field text. The other manuscript, in the St. Gall monastic library, features a green central figure against a red word field text.[23] However it would be

[20] The most recent and complete listing of the manuscripts of the *carmina* may be found in Marc Reydellet, ed., *Venance Fortunat: Poèmes*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1994–2004), 1: lxxi–lxxxv. The Holy Cross acrostic, *Carm.* 2.4, appears in five manuscripts: Paris, BNF MS lat. 8312 fol. 21v, Paris, BNF MS lat. 9347 fol. 83r, Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, MS 5354-5361, fol. 2r, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS C74 sup. fol. 6v, and St. Gall, MS 196 fol. 38.

[21] The Holy Cross acrostic, *Carm.* 2.5, appears in four manuscripts: BNF Lat. 8312 fol. 22r, BFN 9347 Lat. fol. 83v, Milan C74 sup. fol. 7r, and St. Gall 196 fol. 39. The St. Gall manuscript also contains another Holy Cross acrostic, St. Gall 196, fol. 40, which Friedrich Leo wisely relegated to the *carminum spuriorum appendix* of his edition, MGH AA 4.1, 381.

[22] The acrostic on the snare, *Carm.*5.6a, appears in five manuscripts: BNF Lat. 8312 fol. 78v, BFN Lat. 9347 fol. 102v, Brussels 5354-5361 fol. 29r, Milan C74 sup. fol. 22v, and St. Gall 196 fol. 147.

[23] In three of the five manuscripts that include *Carm* 2. 4: BNF Lat. 8312 fol. 21v, BNF Lat. 9347 fol. 83r, and Brussels 5354-5361, fol. 2r, the *versus intexti* making up the forked cross itself and the lines making the border surrounding the central word field are all rubricated against a black word field. In the fourth manuscript, Milan C74 sup, fol. 6v, the borders and the *versus intexti* making up the forked cross are all rubricated while the background word field text was written in brown ink. In the fifth of these manuscripts, which survives in the library of St. Gall, St. Gall 196 fol. 38, the cross shape is depicted in green and both the background word field text, as well as the surrounding border lines, are all written in red. In the case of *Carm.* 2.5, the two Paris manuscripts, BNF Lat. 8312 fol. 22r, and BNF Lat. 9347 fol. 83v, have their borders and the *versus intexti* making up the figure of a

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rash to attempt to reconstruct the original coloration of Fortunatus's manuscripts of the Holy Cross acrostics on the basis of these Carolingian manuscripts. The choice of colors would have been governed by a number of factors, not least the consideration of what was available and at hand.

In the case of Fortunatus's snare figure acrostic written for Bishop Syagrius, the accompanying prose letter reveals in passing that the poet had sent the poem with the figure and border picked out in red lead (*minium*). He notes that this was because that color, but not scarlet (*coccinum*), was available to him where he was (5.6.16). That same letter (5.6.17) reveals that while Fortunatus suggested that Syagrius might like to have the figurative acrostic painted on the wall of the vestibule of his episcopal residence he did not specify which colors might or should be used in a mural version of that poem.

Reading the Weave of the Words

We turn, in this section, to a consideration of the texts of the figurative acrostics on the Holy Cross. How might these poems be read? The figurative acrostic *de signaculo sanctae crucis* (2.4) (Figure 1) is an iconotext that operates on two levels, the symbolic and the lexical. Within the confines of a 35-by-35 line square, the poet has arranged *versus intexti*, readable lines that form the cross and make a visual sign. The framing vertical borders, enclosing the poem on the left and right, also relate to the cross. There is an apostrophe to the cross itself that alludes to its redemptive significance: "Dulce decus signi, via caeli, vita redempti" (vertical left hand border) (Sweet glory of the sign, road to heaven, life of the redeemed). The vertical border on the right introduces the striking paradox "In cruce mors cristi curavit mortua mundi" (The death of Christ on the cross cured the world's deaths).

The depiction of the cross itself, in the horizontal lines of the background text, recalls themes found also in Fortunatus's well-known Holy Cross hymns,[24] and elaborates on the cross as the sweet-smelling tree, the "Tree of Life" that grows in the paradise of God in the Book of Revelation (Rev. 2:7): "Arbor suavis agri, tecum nova vita paratur" (horizontal line 20) (Delightful tree of the field, because of you a new life is prepared). Unlike the tree in Eden that brought death, this sweet-smelling tree in the apocalyptic paradise is the World Tree that bears good fruit, the body of Christ, on its branches.

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triangulated central cross rubricated in contrast to the black ink of the incomplete background word field. However the St. Gall manuscript, St. Gall 196 fol. 39, features the central triangulated cross figure in green against a red word field. Milan C74 sup. fol. 7r, has the borders and the triangulated cross figure, written in red, in contrast to the brown ink of the incomplete background word field.

[24] Compare the tree imagery used by Fortunatus in his hymns *Crux benedicta nitet*, 2.1.9; 2.1.17–18, and *Pange Lingua*, 2.2.6; 2.2.22.

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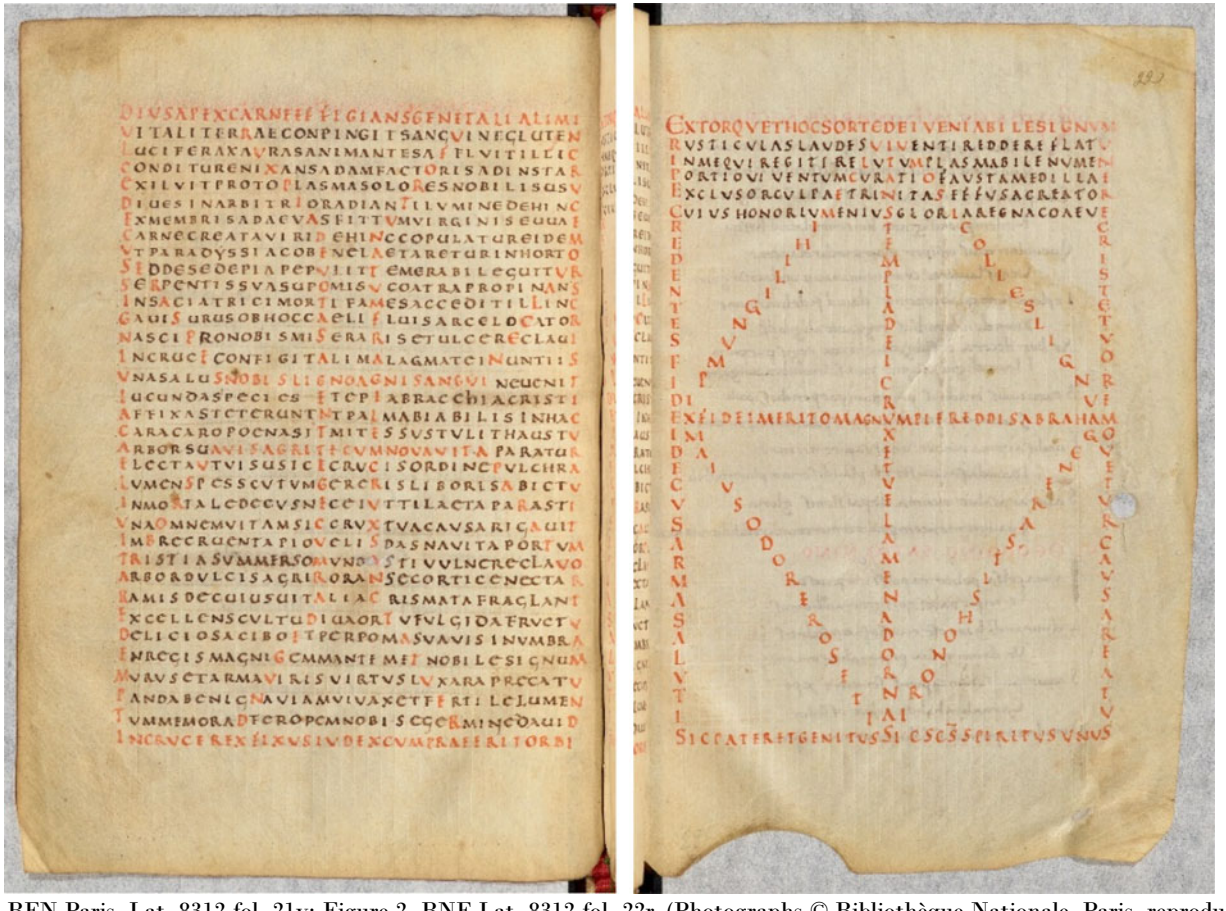

Figure 1. BFN Paris, Lat. 8312 fol. 21v; Figure 2. BNF Lat. 8312 fol. 22r. (Photographs © Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, reproduced with permission).

In the spatial patterning of Fortunatus's quadrilateral acrostic he relates the cross to the four cardinal points. He thus gives a visual expression to the theme of the *consensus universorum*, which he develops elsewhere in his poetry (3.9.35–38; Appendix 2.67–74), that the power of the cross reaches not only to north, south, east, and west, but also encompasses the whole cosmos: land, sea, stars, and sky. Here in this iconotext it is the cosmos that is mapped and the cross signifies the *axis mundi*, the pivotal center of the universe that the cross covers. The four points of the cross figure touch the edges of the four sides of the acrostic to signify the four cardinal directions, the edges of the world. This is a spatial, non-verbal, expression of the ideas deployed elsewhere in Fortunatus's words of praise for the Empress Sophia, the "New Helena" who, with Justin II, sent the relic of the cross to Poitiers and the whole world. He thanked the empress for scattering the saving power of the cross everywhere: "Tu spargis ubique salutem" (*Appendix* 2.69). The saving power of the cross, he notes, having spread from East to West, has also reached the far North. The cross claims the whole world, and covers it with its protection (*Appendix* 2.73–74). This cosmic dimension of the cross is also underlined in Fortunatus's *Pange Lingua* hymn where the blood of Christ is described as flowing over the earth, sea, stars, sky, and universe (2.2.21).

This acrostic 2.4 also has an eschatological significance, for reading the horizontal lines of the poem, we see that Fortunatus's theme is the progression from the beginning top border line — the time of the creation of Adam in the image of the Creator — to the crucifixion and the Lamb that stands at the center of time. There is a progression with nautical imagery through a metrical sea until finally at the end of time the Second Coming of Christ provides the terminal line that locks everything into place and literally makes sense of human history, since Christ, often expressed as the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end, is the king who was nailed to the cross. The poem, when read as a page of horizontal writing, ends with the king on his throne/cross ruling the world as in the *Vexilla Regis* (2.6.16). We also find embedded in the work, horizontal line 31, the words: "en regis magni gemmantem et nobile signum" (horizontal line 31) (Behold the jeweled and noble standard of the great king!), which transfigure the cross into a poetic *crux gemmata* that signifies the victory trophy of Christ.[25]

[25] See Erich Dinkler, "Bemerkungen zum Kreuz als Tropaion," in *Mullus: Festschrift für Theodor Klauser*, ed. Alfred Stuiber and Alfred Hermann, Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum, Ergänzungsband 7 (Münster, 1964), 71–78. The image of the jeweled cross in Fortunatus's acrostic evokes the Ravenna mosaics. Note the plates in Friedrich W. Deichmann, *Ravenna: Hauptstadt des spätantiken Abendlandes*, 6 vols. (Wiesbaden, 1958), 3: 359, 387, and the discussion by Angelo Lipinsky, "La 'Crux Gemmata' e il culto della Santa Croce — nei monumenti superstiti e nelle raffigurazioni monumentali," *Felix Ravenna* fasc. 30 = 81 (1960): 5–62.

Framing the cross, the square borders of the poem both provide the bounds for the text and the right angles serve to mark the "four corners of the earth" (Rev. 7:1).

The *signum crucis* floats at the center of a word-patterned cosmos. Deciphering these lines the reader may discern the sacrificial lamb, the royal king, and the judge who will finally come on the Last Day. This was a poem that was written not for oral performance but for display. The text may be read in a number of different ways. To make lexical and metrical sense of the field of words the readers would have had to be actively involved in the deciphering of the text. They could not remain passive recipients of the words but had to enter into a series of transactions with the poem and with its author.[26] In other words the meaning of the poem does not lie just in the text itself but in the process by which the literate and also semi-literate might be able to make sense of it for themselves. As part of a religious "interpretative community,"[27] the reader would be required to discern the words of the poetry and ponder the images and references embedded in the patterning, shaping the meaning of the poem for themselves in their own active experience of the text.

The text, if it is to be read as words and lines of metrical poetry, would have operated at a number of different reading levels in a society that included the literate, the semi-illiterate, and the illiterate. Merovingian Gaul is now seen to be far more literate than had once been assumed.[28] Clerics and royal administrators operated in an intensely literate milieu, and Fortunatus found patrons and friends among both the clerical and secular elite of Frankish Gaul. His metrical *tituli* for the murals depicting the life of Martin in the church of St. Martin at Tours (10.6), the epitaphs that fill Book Four of his collected works, and even a mural notice he wrote for a rural oratory (10.10), all assume a literate viewer or the presence of a literate person who might read and explain the texts to the illiterate. There is evidence from late antiquity that the literate sometimes played a vital role in the illiterate's reception of sacred images by the contextural decipherment and interpretation of words on a wall in a collective reading of a displayed text.[29] Those who were semiliterate may have been able to make out the names of saints in the same way that semi-literate people in the twenty-first century recognize brand names and bus destinations through the "topography" of the word read as a unit of meaning in situational context. Gregory of Tours records that

[26] See Louise M. Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (Carbondale, IL, 1978), 11–17.

[27] Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in the Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA, 1980), esp. 305–22.

[28] A discussion of literacy and orality in Merovingian Gaul may be found in Yitzhak Hen, *Culture and Religion in Merovingian Gaul AD 481–751* (Leiden, 1995), 21–42.

[29] These texts are discussed in detail in Brian Brennan, "Text and Image: 'Reading' the Walls of the Sixth-century Cathedral of Tours," *The Journal of Medieval Latin* 6 (1996), 65–83.

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Abbot Braccio when young first taught himself to read by deciphering the *tituli* in churches.[30]

The shrine of the Holy Cross in the convent chapel at Poitiers, where special vigils were kept on Wednesdays and Fridays, was a place of miracles. We have evidence that it attracted pilgrims, many seeking cures,[31] so we should therefore assume a lay component within the congregation. Among the male and female lay people would have been those who were literate, semi-literate, or illiterate. Those who were totally illiterate still would have been able to apprehend the cross in its iconographic form within the acrostic.

The evidence for female literacy in Merovingian Gaul is limited but the little that we know comes from accounts of women associated with the church. Gregory records the unnamed wife of Bishop Namatius of Clermont who sat in the church of St. Stephen with a book in her lap reading stories that she then instructed the workmen to depict on the walls.[32] It would appear that the nuns of the Convent of the Holy Cross at Poitiers constituted a highly literate community. Radegund and the abbess Agnes maintained a correspondence with Fortunatus, who even refers to some small poems that Radegund had sent him on waxed wooden tablets.[33] In protecting the interests of the convent Radegund wrote a circular letter to bishops all over Gaul to gain their support.[34] She also wrote to the Frankish kings.[35] The *Rule* written by Caesarius of Arles and followed at Poitiers, required that the nuns spend two hours each day in spiritual reading,[36] and we know that on occasion when Radegund became tired a nun would read the Psalms to her.[37] We know that Radegund sought gospels from the Emperor Justin who sent legates with codices ornamented with gold and gems,[38] and through a poem written by Fortunatus (8.1) for circulation far and wide, she sought to obtain other sacred books, we would assume for a convent library. After Radegund died it was Baudonivia, a nun of the Poitiers convent, who wrote a *Vita Radegundis*. We might expect therefore that the convent included women who would be quite capable of reading and appreciating acrostic poetry.

[30] Gregory of Tours, *LP* 12.

[31] Gregory of Tours, *GM* 5; Baudonivia, *VR* 16.

[32] Gregory of Tours, *LH* 2.17.

[33] Fortunatus, *Carm.* Appendix 31.1–6. Radegund's poetry has not survived.

[34] One of Radegund's letters to bishops is reproduced by Gregory of Tours, *LH* 9.42.

[35] Gregory of Tours mentions two letters Radegund wrote to King Sigibert: *LH* 9.40, something mentioned by Baudonivia, *VR* 16. Baudonivia also mentions (*VR* 10) that Radegund wrote to the Frankish kings, intervening in disputes between one and the other and counseling peace.

[36] Caesarius, *Regula virginum*,19.

[37] Baudonivia, *VR* 8.

[38] Baudonivia, *VR* 16.

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In the acrostic, 2.4, Fortunatus has provided such readers with a text that contains a number of reading pathways, but it is the reader who decides where to begin and how to proceed. The most straightforward and linear approach would be to start at the top left and read each horizontal line down the design as in the reading of a regular text page. Such a reading begins with a narrative of the Creation, the formation of the earth, the sun, and elements, and this leads to the creation of Adam and Eve and the Fall. Deceived by the serpent, Eve eats the fruit of the forbidden tree that brings mankind death. There is a significant personal turn when the poet directly addresses God (2.4.1–14): "Gavisurus ob hoc caeli fluis arce locator nasci pro nobis" (by virtue of this, about to rejoice, Creator, you descend from the citadel of heaven, to be born for us) (2.4.13–15). This is followed by an address to the Cross (2.4.17–18): "Arbor suavis agri, tecum nova vita paratur" (Delightful tree of the field, because of you a new life is prepared.) Appropriately the lines relating to the crucifixion correspond with the cross-bar of the cross shape in the text, for they signify the centrality of the crucifixion both in the poem and in salvation history (2.4.16–20). Then there are the reading pathways mapped out by the *versus intexti*, which makes the cross into a poem to be read within the larger poem. Finally, another way of "reading" the poem would have been to let words, phrases, or sentences jump out of the dense word field. This was commonly done in the practice of the *sortes biblicae* where the Bible was opened by a person at random in the hope of receiving spiritual guidance through the words that jumped out of the text and struck one's eye.[39]

Fortunatus's other, apparently unfinished, figurative acrostic poem (2.5) (Figure 2) features the shape of a cross formed by letters picked out in a different color and framed by triangles that are placed within a square. The triangulated composition symbolizes the Trinity. The words that form the cross appropriately center on *crux* and the horizontal lines of the fuller text in the upper register of the quadrilateral praise the coeternal Trinity. At the foot of the cross where the triangles of the diamonds come together the poet introduces the conceit of the three lines sharing the same terminal "s" in the base line that reads: "sic pater et genitus sic sc̄s spiritus unus" (horizontal line 35) (Thus the Father, thus the Son, thus the Holy Spirit, One). The visual patterning of eight triangles spread out in the poem represents the *Trinitas effusa* of line 5. The portion we have of the horizontal text at the top of the frame shows that Fortunatus began with Creation and the Godhead who fashioned a living being from the clay.

[39] The *sortes biblicae*, essentially a form of divination, was condemned by a number of fifth- and sixth-century Gallic church councils: *Conc. Veneticum* A. 461–91 canon 16 (*Concilia Galliae* CCL 148, 156); *Con. Agathense* A. 506 canon 42 (*Concilia Galliae* CCL 148, 210–11); *Conc. Aurelianense* A. 511 canon 30 (*Concilia Galliae* CCL 148A, 12); *Syn. Autissiodorensis* A. 561–605 (*Concilia Gallia* CCL 148A, 265). Despite this prohibition the practice continued. It is described twice by Gregory of Tours, *LH* 4.16; 5.14.

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There is in lines 4–5 an emphasis on healing and the banishment of guilt. The framing vertical border lines on the left and right have as their subject deliverance from the guilt of sin by Christ's redeeming gift. The cross-shape is centered on the words *agnus* and *crux*, suggesting the centrality of the sacrifice while the four angled lines that join the cross to make triangles contain texts in praise of the cross. On the lines at angles to the cross we find the lines of words making triangles: "Dulce mihi lignum, pie, maius odore rosetis" (descending angled line to the left of the cross: Tree dear to me, O blessed one, your scent surpasses that of rosebushes) and "Dumosi colles lignum generastis honoris" (descending angled line to the right of the cross: O thicketed hills, you have given birth to the tree of honor).

Within the text of 2.4 the donors of the poem appear, both Radegund and the abbess Agnes, whom Radegund had chosen and installed as abbess of the Convent of the Holy Cross. They seem most likely to have commissioned the acrostic work on the Holy Cross. Fortunatus has executed their orders, commemorating both their names on the cross, as was common in donor inscriptions on metal crosses.[40] Their names, and that of Fortunatus himself, are literally the supports of the cross: "Crux pia, devotas Agnen tege cum Radegunde. Tu Fortunatum fragilem, crux sancta, tuere" (descending left and right hand vertical *versus intexti* forming the shaft of the cross) (Venerable cross, protect the devoted women Agnes and Radegund. Defend, Holy Cross, the frail Fortunatus).

The Holy Cross Acrostics — Textile Designs?

It would seem most likely that Fortunatus's acrostics on the Holy Cross were not ultimately intended to serve only as a decorative page in a codex. Fortunatus's poetry has a strong visual focus as Michael Roberts, Sylvie Labarre, and Luce Pietri [41] have demonstrated. They note that the poet shows great interest in the decoration of churches. In this final section of the paper it is argued that the acrostics on the Holy Cross may possibly have been designed by Fortunatus for Radegund and Agnes as patterns for the weaving or embroidery of hangings to decorate their convent chapel at Poitiers. It was common for churches to be embellished with *vela* (veils) and *cortinae* (curtains). Entry to a church was

[40] For example, Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Collection, Accession number: BZ.1955.17, a silver cross with a donor inscription on its face. Note also the imperial donor inscription commemorating the Emperor Justin II and the Empress Sophia on the reliquary cross sent by the emperor to Pope John III, in Sante Guido, *La Crux Vaticana*, 21, plate 15.

[41] Michael Roberts, "Light, Color and Visual Illusion in the Poetry of Venantius Fortunatus," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 65–66 (2011–12), 113–20; Luce Pietri, "Ut pictura poesis: À propos de quelques poèmes de Venance Fortunat," *Pallas* 56 (2001): 175–86; Sylvie Labarre, "La poésie visuelle de Venance Fortunat (Poèmes I–IV) et les mosaïques de Ravenne," in *La littérature et les arts figurés de l'Antiquité à nos jours*, Actes du XIV[e] congrès Budé 25–28 Limoges, août 1998 (Paris, 2001), 369–77.

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commonly through decorative curtains, the nave arcades might be decorated by *vela*, but the most significant hangings were those around the altar where they delineated and separated the sacred space from the nave.[42]

In both East and West splendid hangings were used on the great occasions of both church and state. The imperial palace at Constantinople was decorated with veils hung between the columns,[43] and a similar arrangement is seen in the depiction of the palace of the Gothic king Theoderic in a mosaic in the church of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna.[44] In other Ravenna mosaics, doorways and niches are commonly shown as curtained.[45] At Jerusalem the tomb of Christ and Golgotha as well as the basilica at Bethlehem were all hung with silken veils and curtains for special feasts such as Epiphany, as we learn from the account written by the nun Egeria who visited from the West on pilgrimage in the late fourth century.[46] The practice of decorating churches with veils and curtains made of precious fabrics was also followed at Rome, and in the church of St. Felix at Nola.[47] A similar custom was observed in Gaul. In his description of the baptism of Clovis, Gregory of Tours mentions that the civic squares at Rheims were hung with colored cloths and the churches with white hangings.[48] The basilica of St. Martin at Tours was also decorated with *vela*, and we know from Gregory that the hangings nearest to the tomb of the miracle-working saint, and therefore infused with his *virtus*, were believed to have healing qualities.[49]

[42] On hangings as decoration see Gisela Ripoll López, "Los tejidos en la arquitectura de la antiqüedad tardiva: Una primera aproximación a su uso y función," *Antiquité tardive* 12 (2004): 169–82; Anna Muthesius, *Byzantine Silk Weaving AD 400–AD 1200* (Vienna, 1997), 124–26.

[43] Note the description of decorations of the imperial palace in Corippus, *In laudem Iustini minoris* 3. 206–7: "clara superpositis ornabant atria velis. vela tegunt postes"; 4.208: "serica per cunctas pendebant vela columnas." At 3.255–56 we learn that in the throne room a *velum*, hung in front of the emperor, was then drawn aside to reveal him.

[44] Deichmann, *Ravenna* (n. 23 above), 3:108, 109, 110.

[45] Deichmann, *Ravenna*, 3:168, 358, 384, 385, 407.

[46] *Itinerarium Egeriae* 25. 8: "Qui autem ornatus sit illa die (Epiphany) ecclesiae vel Anastasis aut Crucis aut in Bethleem, superfluum fuit scribi. Ubi extra aurum et gemmas aut sirico nichil aliud vides; nam et si vela vides, auroclaua oleserica sunt, si cortinas vides, similiter auroclaue oleserica sunt."

[47] We do not have information about veils and hangings in sixth-century Roman churches but their use is generally assumed. However the *Liber Pontificalis* covering the lives of the eighth- and ninth-century popes records a great number of papal donations of silk hangings to the major Roman basilicas and churches. See Marielle Martiniani-Reber, "Tentures et textiles des églises romaines au haut Moyen Âge d'après le *Liber pontificalis*," *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome*, Moyen Âge 3 (1999): 289–365. The decoration of the church of St. Felix at Nola in Campania on his feast day is described by Paulinus, *Carm.*14.98–99.

[48] Gregory of Tours, *LH* 2.31.

[49] Gregory of Tours, *VM* 2.60: "mane, adveniens ad basilicam sancti, orationi prosternor. Qua expleta, doloris locum velo, qui ante beatum dependebat sepulchrum, attegi … Iterum

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Fortunatus, in a poem on bishop Gregory's shrine of the cross at Tours, refers to the cloth that had once wrapped the True Cross and that was subsequently venerated there (2.3.13–16), but he also mentions other textiles that decorated this oratory:

> pallia nam meruit, sunt quae cruce textile pulchra
> obsequiisque suis crux habet alma cruces,
> serica quae niveis sunt agnava[50] blattea telis,
> et textis crucibus magnificatur opus.
> sic cito pontifici dedit haec devota voluntas,
> atque dicata cruci conscia vela placent. (2.3.17–22)
>
> He obtained cloths that are beautiful with a woven cross. The nourishing cross has its own crosses attending it. The cloths are silk, snow-white like a lamb, embroidered with purple, and the work is enhanced by woven crosses. Thus rapidly a devoted desire gave these veils to the bishop, pleased to also know that these were dedicated to the cross.

This passage is extremely significant because it establishes that Fortunatus was aware of the production of silk *vela* that were decorated with crosses and associated with the cult of the Holy Cross. However, this description of the decoration on the silk *vela* is far from clear, but it would appear most likely that Fortunatus is referring to embroidery on the white silk, not weaving. It is a vaguely generalized *devota voluntas* (devoted desire) that is credited with the gift of these veils to the bishop for the decoration of the shrine, but no specific donor is mentioned by name.

Radegund, who had been so prominent in the promotion of the cult of the cross in Gaul and who was a spinner and weaver who worked with both wool and silk, is however not mentioned in Fortunatus's poem for Gregory. Caesarius's *Rule for Virgins*, followed by Radegund's convent of the Holy Cross at Poitiers, specifies wool-spinning and weaving as part of the life of the nuns,[51] and this suggests very strongly that textile work was also undertaken in Radegund's convent. Caesarius's *Rule* required nuns to make their own simple unadorned clothes and prohibited the use of luxurious fabrics in the making of bedding or cushions.[52] We do not know the level of textile production that occurred with the convent at Poitiers,

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mane consurgens, pari ut prius modo contacto velo capite, sanus abscessi; *VM* 4.1: "secretius a pendentibus velis unum sub vestimento iniectum, crucis ab hoc signaculum in alvo depinxi; protinus dolore sedato, sanus abscessi": *VM* 4.2; "accessi iterum quaerere sospitatem ad tumulum, tactamque a dependentibus velis, protinus stetit venae pulsus."

[50] Agnauva = agnaufa. See the usage in Gregory of Tours, *GC* 34.

[51] Caesarius, *Regula ad virgines*, 16; 27 (SC 345, 90; 204).

[52] The essential guide to the sixteen sections of Caesarius's *Rule* that deal with textiles is Maria del Fiat Miola. "Permitted and Prohibited Textiles in the *Regula virginum*: Unweaving the Terminology," *Early Medieval Europe* 26 (2018): 90–102.

but we do hear incidentally of a nun who was able to embellish a tunic for her niece,[53] and we do know that Radegund herself spun wool and silk.

Fortunatus, in one of his poems sent to Radegund's cousin Artachis, now living in the Byzantine Empire, reports that Radegund has received the silken skeins that Artachis had sent her as a gift and that she intended to spin them (Appendix 3.17–18). We would assume that the spun silk was then woven into cloth, and we know that in late antiquity, spinning and weaving were undertaken by pious women as part of their devotional life. Such work was often accompanied by psalm-singing and prayer. In the *Vita Radegundis*, written by one of the Holy Cross nuns, we learn that on one occasion, Radegund sent to the Emperor Justin II in Byzantium a garment that appears to have been made for him.[54] The close association of Radegund with spinning and weaving is to be seen in the story of how visitors to Radegund's convent after her death, when she was considered a saint, were shown the spindles that she used to spin as a part of her devotions.[55]

Although we lack much of the detail, it would appear that in the sixth century the Byzantine hand draw-loom, worked by at least two people, would have been known and it could have been fitted with a pattern-making mechanism.[56] Such a loom could transform a complex written text such as the acrostic into a weave. However, the embroidery of the text onto an already woven silk *velum* would have been far less demanding and more easily accomplished. The textiles, mostly from Egypt and the East, that have survived from late antiquity illustrate the degree of technical competence that could be achieved in this period, both in the weaving and in the embroidery of fabrics with decorative patterns, detailed animal and human forms, and even text.[57]

[53] Gregory of Tours, *LH* 10.16

[54] Baudonivia, *Vita Radegundis*, 17.

[55] Gregory of Tours, *GC* 104.

[56] Muthesius, *Byzantine Silk Weaving*, 19–26. See also idem, "Essential Processes, Looms and Technical Aspects of the Production of Silk Textiles," in *Economic History of Byzantium*, ed. Angeliki E. Laiou, 3 vols. (Washington, DC, 2002), 1: 147–68.

[57] Note for example, the sixth-century Syrian silk twill depicting episodes from the life of Joseph with accompanying Greek captions, now in the Sens Cathedral Treasury, Inventory number B36; the wool hanging showing the goddess Hestia Polyolbos in a field of flowers and surrounded by winged *genii* holding disks with the names of different blessings given in Greek script, now in the Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine collection, Washington, DC, Accession number BZ.1929.1; the sixth-century woven wool icon of the enthroned Virgin Mary flanked by archangels, their names given in Greek script while a border features the apostles each named in Greek script, now in the Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH, Accession number 1967. 44; fragments of a sixth-century wool and linen woven textile depicting St. Theodore, his name given in Greek script, now in the Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, MA, Accession number 1939. 112.1.2; the fifth-/sixth-century linen and wool church hanging, which depicts arches topped by birds and columns with Christograms between them, while across the top is woven the name Phoibammon in Coptic script, now in the

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The embroidery of letters on cloth is alluded to by Fortunatus in the epitaph that he wrote for a girl called Eusebia, whom he noted was a talented embroiderer. Thus, the reader of the epitaph is told: "docta tenens calamos, apices quoque figere filo / quod tibi charta valet hoc sibi tela fuit" (4.28.9–10) (She was skilled at holding a pen, and also at sewing letters with thread. What paper is to you, a web was to her). This does not speak for any direct connection between Eusebia and these acrostics we are discussing, but the epitaph does demonstrate, in general terms, that Fortunatus knew of women who would have been quite capable of "writing out" his acrostic poems in thread. Given the requirements of the *Rule* of Caesarius followed at the Convent of the Holy Cross, there may have been a number of nuns at Poitiers capable of such fine work. The *Rule* of Caesarius, which prohibited sumptuous materials in the convent at Arles, enjoined simplicity in the production of altar cloths,[58] but this was clearly not followed at Poitiers. We know from the testimony of a nun recorded in a document quoted by Gregory of Tours that the chapel had an altar cloth made from expensive donated silk and that this altar cloth was made by a nun of the convent who had cut up a head covering (*mafors*) that her family had given her in order to make it. She used the remaining purple material cut from the original silk to affix pieces to her niece's tunic (*tonica*).[59] It was also a notable practice in sixth-century Gaul for pious women to donate *vela* to decorate churches. Placidina, the wife of Bishop Leontius II of Bordeaux, was, for example, praised by the poet for decorating her local church of St. Martin with such *vela* (1.6.21).

It is more than likely that Radegund and Agnes, whom as we have seen are mentioned in the cross within the acrostic, had commissioned these poems (2.4; 2.5) for the decoration of the Chapel of the Holy Cross in their convent at Poitiers. We know with certainty that the poem to Syagrius (5.6a) was not written primarily as a book text. Like the acrostic that was written for Bishop Syagrius's vestibule, Fortunatus's Holy Cross acrostics would have made striking decorations if they were to be painted in contrasting colors on a wall of Radegund's chapel at Poitiers. Yet just because the acrostic poem for Syagrius was intended to be a painted mural text does not mean that these acrostics were also intended for the decoration of a wall. There are, hidden in the texts of 2.4 and 2.5, lines that

Coptic Museum, Cairo, Inventory number 2023; the seventh-century wool and linen woven cloth with Old Testament scenes, now in the Coptic Museum, Cairo, inventory number 1740; the fragment of a fifth-century wool and linen hanging, part of a large curtain and showing a musician next to a decorative border, now in the Coptic Museum, Cairo, Inventory number 7974.

[58] Caesarius, *Regula virginum*, 45: "ipsa etiam ornamenta in oratoriis simplicia esse debent."

[59] In the revolt of the nuns of Holy Cross convent that occurred in 589–90, after the death of Radegund, there were charges that silks donated as altar cloths were cut up by one of the nuns to make clothes for her relative. See Gregory of Tours, *LH* 10.15.

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are suggestive of these acrostic poems having been intended for decorative display not on a wall, but on church hangings, *vela* or veils/sails.

Across his poetry a key characteristic of Fortunatus's literary style is a punning word play (4.1.31; 5.3.10; 7.6.23). Even here in the acrostic 2.4 is his *paranomasia* on Agnus/ Agnes in the "Agnen" and "Agni" in the letters making up the cross shape (cf. 11.3.9–10; 11.4.3). Similarly there is a play on *gemma* as the buds of this fertile tree and as a jeweled cross (horizontal line 31, cf. 8.10.9). In just such a fashion there is also an apparent play on the word *velum* as a sail on a boat and as a veil or hanging. In the incomplete acrostic we find in the vertical line of the cross, significantly referred to by early Christian writers as the mast of a ship, the words: "ditans templa dei, crux, et velamen adornas" (2.5.vertical line making the shaft of the cross) (O cross, you enrich the temples of God and you embellish its veils/sails). In the spatial patterning of this poetic work the central vertical line makes both the shaft of the cross and the mast of a ship under sail.

In 2.4, the acrostic that has come down to us complete, Fortunatus also reflects the same long tradition of the cross being depicted in Christian literature as the "mast" of the ship. A figurative poem by Optatian in the fourth century depicted the "Chi-Rho" as the mast of an oared ship,[60] but more commonly in the Christian writers the ship of the church speeds through the waves impelled by its swelling sails. Christ was also commonly cast as the ship's pilot who will bring the believer to the safe port of salvation.[61] Thus in Fortunatus's acrostic 2.4 we discover, significantly, the line: "velis das navita portum" (horizontal line 25) (By means of sails, O sailor, you give harbor).

The cross as a mast for sails and Christ as the pilot who guides the believer to a safe haven are both familiar Christian images. Compare the *Pange lingua* hymn where the cross is hailed as the noble tree whose "sweet wood" was deemed worthy both to bear the "sweet weight" that was Christ's body, and "portum praeparare nauta mundo naufrago" (2.2.29) (As a sailor to prepare a harbor for a shipwrecked world). We may also rethink the military/*adventus* imagery of the *Vexilla Regis* (2.6) because *vexillum* is the diminutive of *vellum*, and Fortunatus was a poet who constantly exploited the double meanings of words.

As a military standard a *vexillum* often literally had a "little sail" of painted, woven, or embroidered fabric hanging from its transverse pole that was affixed

[60] *Carm.*19, ed. G. Polara, *Porphyrius Optatianus Carmina* (n. 10 above), 2:61.

[61] Christ as pilot or helmsman: Proclus, *Oratio* 27.5 (PG 65, 813B–C); Hippolytus, *De Christo et Antichristo*, 59 (PG 10, 777) speaks of Christ as the "practiced pilot" (*empeiros kubernetes*). Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* 12 has the holy wind, or the Holy Spirit, bringing the ship of believers to safe anchor in the harbors of heaven. Augustine, *In evang. Ioh. tract.* 2.2 (CSEL 36, 12–13) has the ship of salvation returning "ad patriam." So also Jerome, *Capitulationes libri Iosue, praefatio* (PL 28, 506B) and Maximus of Turin, *Sermo* 49 (CCL 23, 145) both of whom reference the voyage of Odysseus.

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to the vertical stake.[62] In Fortunatus's hymn *Vexilla Regis* the transverse element of the cross bears the body of Christ, which was "suspensus est patibulo" (2.6.4) (hung from a gibbet). Paradoxically, however, the cross now becomes metamorphosed into a *vexillum*,[63] both a proud military standard and a "little sail" suspended from a mast. Both images were well established metaphors for Christ's victory.

Early Christian writers depicted the Church as a ship with Christ or the cross as its "mast," and its billowing sails filled by the Holy Spirit.[64] In both of the acrostics (2.4 and 2.5) we find the same image of the cross as the mast of the ship. Given that, then clearly it is the spread of text across the field that is to be read as the sail (*velum*).

In the incomplete work (2.5), the shaft of the cross/mast and crossbar connected by diagonal lines in a squared field provides the eight triangles of the *Trinitas effusa*, the "spread out Trinity" (2.5.5), that make up the full sail. Indeed, at first sight, the pattern resembles more an unfurled sail with rigging, or even a series of lateen sails, rather than a cross, and it is the cross image that then needs to be interpreted metaphorically. By contrast the other complete poem (2.4) more clearly features the cross as a *signaculum* that also has to be interpreted metaphorically, as the mast of the sailing ship of salvation. The complete figurative poem (2.4), which works well on a page, would also have been suitable to be woven into or embroidered on a hanging or "veil" (*velum*). The text, if displayed on a weighted *velum*, would have been immediately legible. However the text really would have come to life if it were displayed on a *velum* that might have caught the breezes in a church. Parts of the lexical text might have been hidden suddenly,

[62] The sole surviving *vexillum*, from third-century Roman Egypt, is a square of linen cloth 0.47 m wide by 0.50m painted with an image of the goddess Victoria. See the discussion of it by Michael I. Rostovtzeff, "*Vexillum* and Victory," *Journal of Roman Studies* 32 (1942): 92–106. Rostovtzeff believed other *vexilla* may have been woven or even embroidered.

[63] Note, for example, how the paradox was earlier highlighted by Jerome, *Ep.* 107. 2 (CSEL 55, 292): "vexilla militum, crucis insignia sunt. Regum purpuras et ardentes diadematum gemmas, patibuli salutaris pictura condecorat." (The army standards bear emblems of the cross. The purple of kings and the jewels sparkling on their diadems are decorated with the gibbet sign of salvation).

[64] Thus the mast of a ship as a sign of the cross in Tertullian, *Adv. Marcionem* 3.18 (PL 2, 346): "Nam et in antenna navis, quae crucis pars est, extremitates cornua vocantur: unicornis autem, media stipitis, palus. Also the third century Christian apologist Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, 29 (PL 3, 346): "Signum sane crucis naturaliter visimus in navi, cum velis tumentibus vehitur, cum expansis palmulis labitur." Hippolytus of Rome, *De Christo et Antichristo*, 59 (PG 10, 777) also pictured the mast of the ship of the Church as the cross of Christ like a trophy (*tropaion*). Clement of Alexandria, *Paidagogos*, 3.11 (PG 8, 633) mentions a sailing ship running before a strong wind as one of the coded nautical subjects that he deemed suitable for Christian signet rings. The mast metaphor is also deployed by Ambrose, *De virginitate*, 18 (PL16, 297): "Cur enim navis eligitur in qua Christus sedeat, turba doceatur, nisi quia navis ecclesia est, quae pleno dominicae crucis velo sancti spiritus flatu in hoc bene navigat mundo?" See also the fifth century writer Maximus of Turin, *Sermo* 49 (CCL 23, 145) for the mast that is the cross.

only to be revealed dramatically later. At such times the background lexical text might not have been completely accessible. Yet the cross shape of the central figure on the veil could still have been apprehended by the viewer as a meaningful "iconotext" even if the *velum* were fluttering or billowing.

The text gives a great prominence to Agnes and Radegund by making their names an integral part of the shaft of the cross, and this suggests strongly that the acrostic was produced for them. Since no mention is made of Gregory within the acrostic it would seem that the text was not related to that bishop's oratory at Tours, which we have seen was hung with *vela* decorated with crosses.

There is much to suggest that Fortunatus's text in the completed work (2.4) may indeed have once appeared on a *velum* that hung at Poitiers, perhaps in front of the reliquary itself. The actual relic of the cross may have been revealed only on special occasions, just like the image of the crucified Christ at Narbonne, which was covered by a *velum* and only shown infrequently.[65] The origin of such a practice would be found in Byzantium, where the emperor was hidden behind a *velum* and then revealed,[66] and in the Eastern Church, where veiled icons might then be shown.[67] Floating on a *velum*, hung perhaps in the liminal space between the reliquary in the sanctuary and the worshippers assembled in the nave of the convent chapel at Poitiers, Fortunatus's figurative acrostic may have served as an iconotext to project the power of the Holy Cross to a the sixth-century congregation of clerics, nuns, and laypeople.[68]

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[65] Gregory of Tours, *GM* 22.

[66] Corippus, *In laudem Iustini minoris* 3. 255–56. Corippus's later comments (4.86–87) on the importance of curtains in the staging of concealment and revelation gives us an insight into the Byzantine aesthetic: "quod vulgo est, vile est: quidquid latet, extat honore; / quodque magis tegitur, pretii maioris habetur." (That which is commonplace is of little value: whatever is hidden stands out in honor. And thus, the more a thing is covered, the more valuable it is considered.)

[67] Muthesius, *Byzantine Silk Weaving*, 124–25, suggests that the covering of images or relics in the West come from the influence of Byzantine silk hangings either placed at the foot of icons or over them. The Byzantine usage of the *podea* placed below an icon is described by Anatole Frolov, "La 'podea' un tissu décoratif de l'église byzantine," *Byzantion* 13 (1938): 461–504. The term *katapetasma*, orginally used in the sixth century for a veil or curtain separating the sanctuary from the nave of a church, was later used for a veil that covered an icon.

[68] A lay congregation on occasion can be assumed from the healing cult that attracted pilgrims and sick to the relic. Note Gregory of Tours, GM 5; Baudonivia, *Vita Radegundis VR* 16.

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