Writing Texts, Drawing Signs

On Some Non-alphabetical Signs in Charters of the Early Medieval West

by

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In memoriam
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In European history from the fifth to the eleventh centuries the first and the most momentous break remains the break-up of the western Roman empire: “Reactions to the old moralistic reading of the ‘end’ of ancient civilization have often in recent decades sought to stress continuities across the fifth century, particularly in cultural and religious practices, and partly in political aspiration too; these continuities were real. The old image of the sweeping away of Roman culture by vital Germanic barbarism (succeeded by Roman-German ‘fusion’ under the aegis of Catholic churchmen) is irretrievably outdated as a result. But this does not mean that the fifth century in the West was not a major period of change”. During that century the fiscal and economic basis of the Roman state did indeed change. The result was that the economic unity of the western

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1 This is a revised and expanded version of the paper presented at the XXIIth Congress of the International Committee of Historical Sciences held in Jinan (China), 23rd–29th August 2015, for the Panel (Specialized Theme 1) ‘The History of Writing Practices and Scribal Culture’ (organized by Martyn Lyons with the support of the Australasian Historical Association).


Mediterranean was broken, the ‘barbarian’ aristocracies at the helm of the post-Roman kingdoms became localized and poorer, and the material culture much simpler in most places. The historical relationship between the fall of the Roman empire and the beginning of ‘something else’ – the Early Middle Ages, for example, in the West – represents one of the broadest and most pervasive themes ever discussed in western historiography, in particularly for the conceptualization of the period of ‘Late Antiquity’

Whatever the interpretations of the period from the fifth century onwards may be – radical change or continuity – one point can be certainly made regarding that transition in the western part of the late Roman empire. In the late Roman empire the basis of the government and administration – and the network of communication in general – was founded on a Greek-Latin linguistic and graphic koine. But also in post-Roman kingdoms the barbarian aristocracies did not ignore the written medium as a tool both of government and of economic relations: they used it, certainly, in much more simplified and fragmented way – as far as we know from the

For an overview of the question and related main bibliography, most recently Avril Cameron, Christian Conversion in Late Antiquity: Some Issues, in: Conversion in Late Antiquity: Christianity, Islam and Beyond. Papers from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Sawyer Seminar, University of Oxford, 2009-2010, ed. by Arietta Papaconstantinou/Neil McLynn/Daniel L. Schwartz, London 2015, p. 3-22, and particularly the paragraph 1, ‘Late Antiquity Again’. It is significant that at the XXII Congress of the International Committee of Historical Sciences (see note 4) a panel was devoted to the theme ‘Late Antiquity in Contemporary Debate’ (organized by Ritu Lizza Testa with the support of the Italian National Committee). The work of Chris Wickham quoted above (see note 1) represents a brilliant example, in which Late Antiquity – or at least a part of it – and the Early Middle Ages are conceptualized together on the same continuum.

Of both change and continuity, depending on regional differences: Christopher J. Wickham, Framing the Early Middle Ages. Europe and the Mediterranean 400-800, Oxford 2005, p. 12-14.


Rare survival of charters of that period – but written in Latin and in a script which was inherited in some way from the late Roman world.

Latin remained the common language of communication for a long time in the West; it ceased to have any effect as a language of vertical communication between the eighth and ninth centuries, at different times and phases in different parts of Europe. What is important to stress here is that in Merovingian France or in Lombard Italy or in Visigothic Spain illiterate people participating in legal proceedings could understand written documents when they were read out to them: the “Latin parlé tardif” always emerges, at least, in the written Latin employed in the part of the document containing the essential details of the transaction.

Even if they are extremely rare, the written sources that survive from the post-Roman kingdoms doubtless demonstrate that the form of the legal documents employed by the ‘barbarians’ was somehow ‘Roman’, in terms of its basic structure and for single textual units, in different ways in
different places\textsuperscript{12}. The basic textual frame of the ‘Barbarian’ documents is, more or less, recognizable as part of a Roman ‘discourse’: this fact gives fundamental evidence for the derivation of the early medieval documentary practice from the late Roman world, but this constitutes, at the same time, the main obstacle for understanding how that process of composition worked\textsuperscript{13}, that is to say, understanding concretely what the legal document was in the post-Roman kingdoms. The sources are rare also for the late Roman period\textsuperscript{14}: we barely have an idea, for example, of the late Roman document in the western part of the empire. Trying to explain the structure of the contract of sale documented in the papyri from Ravenna of the sixth century, Jan Olof Tjäder had to admit: “Was den Ursprung des

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  \item \textsuperscript{13} For the Lombard documents most recently François Bougard/ Antonella Ghignoli, Elementi romanì nei documenti longobardi, in: L’héritage byzantin en Italie (VIIe–XIIe siècle). I. La fabrique documentaire, ed. by Jean-Marie Martin/Annick Peters-Custot/ Vivien Picgent (Collection de l’École française de Rome 449), Rome 2011, p. 241–301, which cites the main related bibliography. About the collections of \textit{formulae} as sources and their usage in Frankish Gaul see Alice Rio, Legal Practice and the Written Word in the Early Middle Ages. Frankish Formulae, c. 500–1000, Cambridge 2011.
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Available sources are: Egyptian papyri (from 500 to the late eight century), Italian papyri (from Ravenna, from sixth to early seventh century), the wooden tablets from Vandalic Africa (Tebessa, fifth century). For editions and classification of all the papyri, and for their digital images see the portal PapiroInfo – http://papiroinfo.info (site visited 10.5.2015) –, which supports searching, browsing, and aggregation of ancient papyrological documents and related materials from Advanced Papyrological Information System (APIS), Duke Databank of Documentary Papyri (DDbDP), Heidelberger Gesamtverzeichnis der griechischen Papyrusurkunden Ägyptens (HgV), and Bibliographie Papyrologique (BP); it depends on close collaboration with the portal of papyrological and epigraphical resources Trismegisto http://www.trismegisto.org (site visited 24.6.2016). Useful, but only for papyri of Byzantine Aphrodiasis, is the list (Annee 2) in Les archives de Dioscoro d’Aphrodito ent ans après leur découverte. Histoire et culture dans l’Egypte byzantine, ed. by Jean-Luc Fournet, Paris 2008. Abbreviations for papyrological publications follow the conventions of the Checklist of Editions of Greek, Latin, Demotic and Coptic Papyri, Ostraca and Tablets: http://scriptorum.lib.duke.edu/papyrus/texts/clist.html (site visited 2.4.2016). All the greek papyri containing some lines or words in latin language are available in facsimile also in the first series of ChLA. For the Vandaliic tablets, see Tablettes Albertini. Actes privés de l’époque vandale (fin du Ve siècle), ed. by Christian Courtout/Louis Leschi/Charles Perret/Charles Saumagne, Paris 1952.
\end{itemize}

Formulares (der Formulare) betrifft, wird die Untersuchung gewisse Hinweise geben, aber diese müssen gegen die Tatsache abgewogen werden, dass uns für das 3., das 4. und für den weitaus größten Teil des 5. Jhs. kein direktes Vergleichsmaterial zur Verfügung steht\textsuperscript{15}. Thus signifying, theoretically, the impossibility to suppose a unique late Roman ‘archetype’ of the post-Roman documents: we can only imagine the late Roman sources as an ‘open transmission’, where stematic analysis can play a very limited role and relationships between witnesses and branches remain for many aspects obscure.

The early medieval charter of the Latin West does not consist of written texts only: it is a complex system of written alphabetical texts and graphic devices, as well as material ones like, for example, seals; all these are elements of different natures, employed together as codes in the same overall communicative process. The new approach in studying the early medieval charters as such a complex system began in Germany with the leading works of Peter Rück and his school\textsuperscript{16}, who promoted a field of investigations where where diplomatics – the discipline traditionally devoted to the study of medieval documents – must involve concepts and results taken from other disciplines – archaeology, numismatics, semiotics, anthropology for example – in explicating morphology, semantics, syntax, pragmatic function and changes over time of the elements of this system\textsuperscript{17}. The well-studied subjects in this field have been, however, those ‘graphische Symbole’ which represent the typical, striking features of the charters of the rulers (kings, emperors, popes, but also dukes, counts or bishops and abbots) in the ‘late’ early middle ages, that is from the ninth century onwards. In this period the ‘communication verticale’ in Latin between literate élites and the illiterates cannot be conceived; only clerics as scribes of a ruler or laymen as public notaries of a kingdom had at that time competence and ability to write Latin texts and draw into them graphic devices; the text of the documents had to be translated, even to the addressee, while the graphic symbols can immediately, more or less, communicate a message: this is the fundamental question in understanding the communicative function of medieval charters. Comparative studies in the field of diplomatic semiotics

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  \item \textsuperscript{15} Jan Olof Tjäder, Die nichtliterarischen lateinischen Papyri Italiens aus dem Zeit 445–700, Stockholm 1982, p. 3.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} A manifesto-book: Graphische Symbole im mittelalterlichen Urkunden, ed. by Peter Rücker (Historische Hilfswissenschaften 3), Sigmaringen 1996.
\end{itemize}
have gained considerable results in understanding the morphology of monograms, distinguished scripts, special signs, layout of the text and format of the parchment, figures and *legendae* on seals, but synchronic and diachronic analyses in this field have been conducted mainly, and naturally, on post-Roman western sources, substantially omitting the late Roman sources.

Non-alphabetical signs are drawn within the text of legal documents as well as letters (both private and official) of the late Roman period: In this Greek-Latin written *koiné* they seem to be a widely spread writing practice, by literates and illiterates too. Their external feature is not particular noticeable within the graphic texture of the written text in Greek or Latin cursive; the technology requested in drawing signs is the same for writing a text: a human hand tracing thin lines. Some of these signs communicate meaning without any need for literacy in any language; some do not belong to an ordinary alphabetical system; some seem to have transcended the language in which they were originating. The aim of this paper is to examine the documentary sources of the Late Antiquity through the perspective of the presence and meaning of this kind of graphic signs and to explore the possibility of comparing them with analogues in the Latin “pragmatic literacy” of the West in sixth to eighth centuries. I will highlight only few selected cases that I believe can show us further aspects of a dynamic survival of ‘Roman’ writing practices in the post-Roman kingdoms.

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21 An overview in Peter Rock, Beiträge zur diplomatischen Semiotik, in: Graphische Symbole (see note 17) p. 13–47.
26 Blumell, Lettered Christians (see note 22), p. 43–46. For the use of signs in form of diagonal crosses with no Christian implications in documentary texts (letters, orders of arrest), ibid. p. 43, note 75.
27 Ibid. p. 302 and p. 310, Table 4.

1. Sign of the cross and related Christian symbols in the late Roman writing practices of daily life

In the third essay devoted to the history of the sign of cross Franz Joseph Dölger has demonstrated that from the end of the fourth century, at least, the Greek cross (+) and the diagonal cross (κ) – in the shape of the so-called saltire – were employed as a Christian symbol in written texts.

Different functions can be observed according to the context, but the meaning was always the same: the ‘name of Christ’. The connection between sign and meaning is resolved in ‘Christ’ as a personal name, and it can be said that it is a sort of ‘nominal’ connection. This is due also to the fact that on the one hand the diagonal cross had the same shape of the Greek letter Χ (chi), the initial of the name Χριστος; on the other, that the Greek cross (+) was used to indicate the Greek letter Χ itself.

The first evidence of a Greek cross employed as Christian sign in letters where Christian authorship is certain is in P.Oxy.LVI 3862, a letter of recommendation written in Greek by Philoxenus to his parents and uncle, dating to the fourth/fifth centuries: it is drawn in central position over the first line of the text. The presence of crosses with the certain function of Christian symbol in letters from the late antique Oxyrhynchus increases during the fifth century and became general in the sixth and seventh centuries. A cross in the so-called Latin shape – or _crux ordinaria_, where the vertical stroke is longer than the horizontal one – is not documented in the papyri from the Late Roman Egypt. The Christian letters on papyrus pertaining to the Oxyrhynchus documents contain another important symbol related to the cross: the staurogram. It appears sometimes marked with Greek crosses, but sometimes it is alone, usually drawn in the left margin at either the beginning or the end of the letter. It is first documented in P. Oxy. XXXIV 2729, a letter of Dioscorides to Auleius, in Greek, about the middle of the fourth century. The monogram composed of the two initial letters of the name Χριστος – the χι ρι ς monogram, the most well-
known among Christian monograms – is documented only in P.Oxy. XXXI 2609, a letter to a sister dating to the fourth century, and this evidence is strongly uncertain25. No traces are found of the other two monograms based on the name of Jesus Christ, composed of its initial letters: the iota-chi ‘ι(ηπικος) Χ(ριστος)’, and the iota-eta ‘ι(ηπικος) Ε(ταυς)’ monograms.

The function of Greek cross and staurogram in the Christian letters from the fourth to sixth centuries Oxyrhynchus papyri is clearly evident, confirmed by their position in the text: the symbols serve as an invocation to Christ, the very beginning of everything, but at the same time they also function as a special greeting, a blessing to the addressee.

The distinction between the staurogram and the chi-rho monogram (called also christogram or, more in general, Chrismon) is fundamental: they have different morphology and different origin. The staurogram is a compendium (in the sense of letter-combination, monogram, and not in the strict sense of abbreviation) formed by superimposing the Greek letter rho over a letter tau. As such this figure is documented for the first time in the extant portion of the codex of the Gospel of John, dated to second or third century, the P.Bodm. II: in statements referring to Jesus’ cross or crucifixion the noun σωφρόνης and the verb σωφρόνω present the monogram tau-rho in the middle of the word, between the initial σ- and the ending -ός or -ώς, in substitution of -τοφ- (ταυ and p). It has recently been argued, fairly convincingly, by Larry Hurtado that the staurogram used in certain early Christian manuscripts “represents the earliest extant visual reference to the crucified Jesus”26. Whereas the letter-combinations iota-eta, iota-chi and chi-rho are true monograms, whose component letters refer to Jesus by name or a Christological title, “the tau-rho combination did not have any such function. Its component letters neither derive from, nor refer to, Jesus’ name or any of the familiar Christological titles”27 (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Monograms chi-rho, iota-chi, iota-eta and staurogram: from HURTADO, The Staurogram (see note 26) p. 209

A second important observation to make is that the staurogram has developed independently within the Christian tradition, without any original connection with the Egyptian ankh (the sign meaning ‘life’)28, which is currently called crux ansata. The best way to avoid the confusion about the identification of staurograms and their distinction from Christograms in is not to use such terms as crux ansata or ‘Enkelkreuz’ to indicate what actually is a staurogram29.

The Ancient Roman epistola not only “wirkte auf die Schreiben der Päpste, wie auf das Urkundenwesen der germanischen Könige” but “wurde auch maßgebend für die neuromische Geschäftsurkunde und durch sie für das ganze frühmittelalterliche Privatarkenwesen”30. Thus it cannot be stated that the symbolic invocation at the beginning of charters represent an innovation of the early medieval documentary tradition31. The practices of writing letters documented in the papyri from the Christian late antique Oxyrhynchus demonstrate the contrary, as does some evidence in Greek legal documents of the age of Justinian32. An extraordinary example of the link between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages is provided in the fragments of the visigothic documents written on slate: all the invocation signs drawn at the beginning of lists, agreements, sales, conceived in the most different forms (notitia, chartula or placiurium),

27 Ibid. p. 212.
28 Ibid. p. 310, Table 4.
29 It happens, for example, in Erika EISENLOHR, Von ligierten zu symbolischen Invokations- und Rekognitionszeichen in frühmittelalterlichen Urkunden, in: Graphische Symbole (see note 17) p. 183.
30 Oswald REDLICH, Die Privaturkunden des Mittelalters, München 1911, p. 5.
31 It is so, for example, in Benoît-Michel TOCK, Scribes, souscripteurs et témoins dans les actes privés en France (VIIe–début XIIe siècle), Turnhout 2005, p. 147.
32 Griechische Papyrusrundungen spätromischer und byzantinischer Zeit aus Hermopolis Magna, ed. by Günter PATZEL (Agyptische Urkunden aus den staatlichen Museen zu Berlin. Griechische Urkunden 17 = Archiv für Papyrologie und verwandte Gebiete, Beiheft 7), München 2001: see for example the document n. 2684 (29th September 555), Taf. IX: there is a staurogram, as invocation sign, both at the beginning and at the end of the document.
are stauromgrams\textsuperscript{35}. In two cases the staurogram is accompanied by a true
christogram: it is a monogram iota-eta. Here the nexus between the two
Greek initials of the name of Jesus, in minuscule form, by sharing the ver-
tical stroke gives to the whole the shape of the Latin letter h\textsuperscript{44}; a figura well
known in the western early medieval charters\textsuperscript{35}.

2. The sign of the cross as writing practice of illiterates

Christograms and stauromgrams “represent visual phenomena, and so, as
reverential references to Jesus in early Christian usage, they have a certain
iconographic function and significance, which should be recognized”\textsuperscript{36}.
From the point of view of their graphical realization, christograms and
stauromgrams may appear signs of a simple shape, but they are not. Their
shape is the result of writing two Greek alphabetical signs in monogram-
matic composition. Certainly, one could have learned and memorized the
figure in its entirety. In any case, it would have involved holding the cala-
mas and managing it in order to trace a complex sign over the surface of a
piece of papyrus, parchment, slate or wooden tablet: a manual skill that an
illiterate could hardly have. A different matter is being able to draw a sin-
gle line or two crossed lines or simple little circles.

The gradual introduction of signature in the diplomatics of the late
Roman state between the end of fourth and fifth centuries and the increas-
ing use of papyrus at the same time represent a turning point in the legal
system of the period as regards the value of a document as evidence.
“Die Unterschrift auf einer Papyrusurkunde”, as Lothar Saupé has writ-
ten, “ermöglichte die Verbindung von Beweisfunktion und rechtsgeschicht-
licher Willenserklärung [...] Die Unterschrift stellt sich somit sowohl in den Rechtsquellen wie vor allem in den urkundenlichen

\textsuperscript{35} Soriano, Las pizarras visigodas (see note 6) n. 8, 11, 20, 40.1, 40.2, 41, 46.1, 48, 50, 54, 56, 59, 60, 70, 71, 94, 97; but the stauromgrams are called by the editor ‘Crismones’, ibid.
p. 137 and passim.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid. n. 40.1 and 59.II: respectively a charitula ventionis of the beginning of the seventh
century and an epistula moralis as a school exercise probably of the age of King Quin-
dasvinto (642–649).

\textsuperscript{37} Lothar Saupé, Unterfertigung mit Handzeichen auf Urkunden der Nachfolgestaaten
des Westromischen Reiches bis zur Mitte des 8. Jahrhunderts, in: Graphische Symbole (see
note 17) p. 99–105. For the distinction between a signature by writing a text and a signature
by drawing a sign (a ‘Handzeichen’), in German terminology, respectively ‘Unterschrift’
and ‘Unterzeichnung’ – see Saupé, Die Unterfertigung (see note 7) p. 2. A quite different
matter is that of the ‘Handfertigung’, that is the placing of an illiterate’s hand over the sign
traced on the pergament by the scribe of the document: in Lombard Italy there is the first
palaeographical evidence of this in 737, ibid. p. 83.

\textsuperscript{38} See Tabletes Albertini (see note 14) 1 p. 59.
cross are present in these sources, there is no doubt that the traced crosses were Christian signs: particularly significant is the similarity of the shape of the traced diagonal cross the to the Greek letter chi – Χ –, initial of χριστός.

Illegitamate signatories to Greek private documents on papyrus from the early Byzantine Egypt seem to prefer drawing simple Greek crosses. The same practice is documented in almost the same period in the Italian papyri, with the Latin private documents from the Ostrogothic and then Byzantine Italy (from the fifth to seventh centuries). The illegitimate seller Dominus, a hawker (agellanarius) and vir honestus, seems to have intended to give a particular graphic emphasis to the sign of the cross in his subscription: it is composed of a Greek cross and a diagonal cross crossing each other and of a circle around them connecting their extremities. The evidences we have from the original documents preserved from Frankish Gaul (from the sixth to seventh centuries) and Lombard Italy (from the eighth century) show us again illegitimates drawing a cross before (or within) their respective signing line which the notary or the scribe of the document had written. The cross appears traced in one of the two typical forms inherited from the Late Antiquity: the Greek cross or the diagonal one (the ‘salitre’ seems to be used only in the Merovingian documents). In at least one Frankish charter the Greek cross written by illegitimates appears in a significant variant form, the ends of its two arms are bent at nearly right angle: its form is that of a hooked cross.

In terms of writing practices by illegitimates, the sources from the fifth to eighth centuries do not show elements of discontinuity. Hence two observations can be made. For an illegitimate drawing the cross was the only possibility of taking active part in the writing process of legal documents: given the use by literate of putting a Christian symbol at the beginning of the autograph subscription – as we will see in the next paragraph –, one could most easily conclude from it that the ‘illegitimate cross’ – if we can call it thus – was in some way a sort of “Unterschrift in abgekürzter, rudimentärer Form”. Moreover, the cross was a potent symbol and it never lost all the intensity of its symbolic meaning. It must surely have seemed inconceivable for anyone to draw that sign by their own hand with the purpose of misusing it. In any case, the practice of drawing a cross by illegitimates in the post-Roman period involves – it must be stressed again – the fundamental assumption, that an illegitimate Frank, Goth or Lombard could understand – still in the seventh century, at least – the written Latin language of the document, that the notary used to read aloud again at the end of the writing process to all participants (author and witnesses), according to the statement relegi ei chartam contained in the document itself.

3. In the name of crucified Jesus: stauromachia in autograph subscriptions

In the Late Roman Antiquity, drawing a Greek cross on, more frequently, a stauromachia at the beginning and also at the end of an autograph text with the intention to give all the messages that a visual reference to the cross of Jesus could communicate, was not exclusively a feature of the practice of letter writing at least, as we have seen, from the fourth/fifth centuries onwards. The sparse evidence we have in the sixth century – legal documents written by one of the two contracting parties, for example, or inventories – are presumably traces of a more widespread use in pragmatic literacy. The same use connected with the same original function – it would be reasonable to presume – can be observed also in the autograph subscriptions to official documents, issued in the form of epistolae by provincial officials and government bureaucrats. What we know about the

46 It is a successful definition by SONDERKAMP, Privaturkunde (see note 41) p. 112.
47 “Whether the tau-rho was adopted originally as a pictogram of the crucified Jesus (as I tend to think), or was interpreted more along the lines of Epheba’s numerical symbolism, either way it was a visual reference to the cross of Jesus”, HURTADO, Stauromachia (see note 26) p. 225.
48 For the first example, see Griechische Papyrururkunden (see note 32) n. 2684, a lease, dated 20th September 555, written in a very elegant cursive by the leaseholder Aurelio Paulo, who also drew in a very elegant shape the stauromachia at the beginning and at the end of the text. For the second example a little stauromachia ended an inventory of documents, in ligature with the ending of the final letter of the last word of the last item in an unpublished fragment of Latin papyrus datable to the end of sixth century, about which a forthcoming study by Teresa De Robertis, Antonella Ghignoli and Stefano Zamponi is announced in Di Roberto, Schriften romana (see note 8) p. 232, note 32.
subscriptions of emperors, government bureaucrats, and secretaries of the provincial chanceries is that those subscriptions were brief, structured in accordance to recurring formulas of greeting (bene vale), of order (proponatur), of statement (legi, complevi, recognovi)⁴⁹; they were generally autograph, written in first person but without the name of the signatory expressed; moreover those subscriptions were in Latin language and Latin alphabet even though the text of the document was written in Greek language and Greek script⁵⁰.

The only autograph subscription of an emperor we have is that of Theodosius II, datable between 425 and 450, preserved in the so-called P.Leid. Z: bene valed te cupimus without any symbolic sign⁵¹. However, some autograph subscriptions of provincial officials survive.

From the fourth century we have a short series of papyri containing orders of the præses Thebaidos: the præses has drawn before his legi or legisim-us statement a staurogram, but sometimes the sign is traced also at the end of the line. The subscription of the præses is accompanied by that of the secretary in the form of the so-called ‘R barré’, an abbreviation with the fairly probably meaning of R(ecognovis)⁵²: it has a little Greek cross traced over the letter R⁵³.

Another good example is preserved in a fragment of an official letter, written in a provincial chancery cursive, datable to the fifth century but whose provenance is unknown⁵⁴: a perfectly drawn staurogram precedes the autograph signature in Latin, bene vale⁵⁵.

⁵⁰ See in general on the subject Bruno Faas, Studien zur Überlieferungsgeschichte der römischen Kaiserurkunde, in: AUF 1,2 (1908), p. 185-271; Clasen, Spät-römische Grundlagen (see note 49) p. 77-81; Saule, Unterfertigung (see note 7) p. 108-124.
⁵¹ Faas, Studien (see note 50) p. 188-194; Clasen, Spät-römische Grundlagen (see note 49) p. 77-78.
⁵² Clasen, Spät-römische Grundlagen (see note 49) p. 76, note 42; Saule, Unterfertigung (see note 7) p. 117.
⁵⁴ P.RyL Gk. 615 = ChLA 4, n. 252.
⁵⁵ Its shape is identical to that of the staurogram traced on the margins of Greek Bible manuscripts of the same period, Bruce M. Metzger, Manuscripts of the Greek Bible: An Introduction to Palaeography, New York 1981, p. 84-85, Table 17.

A spectacular piece is P.RyL Gk. 609, an authentic order from Theophanes comes rei militaris Thebaici limitis, dated to the year 505⁶⁶. It was written in Greek by a scribe in the count’s chancery and it carries three Latin subscriptions: the signature of Theofanes – bene vale – preceded by a staurogram; the subscription of the referendarius – Complevi ... – certifying the regular form and correct content of the letter, also preceded by a staurogram; the signature of the scribe himself (with the same ink as the text) – simply a bene vale without any symbol. Remarkable is the different ductus of the two stauromgrams. The referendarius draws the sign in the normal way, in two strokes: the first one, without lifting the calamus, serves to trace the loop of the rho – the ‘head’ of the crucified – towards left and down the vertical stroke; the second stroke, to trace in elegant wavy line the horizontal stroke of the tau. Theofanes employs instead three strokes: the first, to trace, without lifting the calamus a closed circle, in a not perfectly round shape, as ‘head’ of the symbol (the loop of the rho); the second one, to trace the vertical stroke as descender both of the rho and the tau; the third one to trace the horizontal stroke of the tau (Fig. 2).

The so-called Papyrus Butini is a well known fragment of a charter from the chancery of a comes sacri stabuli, datable to the sixth century⁵⁷, written in the cursive of the Roman provincial chancelleries, which Jean Mallon considered the direct ancestor of the chancery scripts employed by Merovingian kings in Frankish Gaul⁵⁸. It carries two autograph subscriptions. One – bene vale – is preceded by a small Greek cross: for Mallon and for the editor of the fragment in ChLA it is, probably, of the comes himself. In the other subscription something appears traced before the bene vale, but in that point the papyrus is damaged and only conjectures are possible⁵⁹. There is another source datable to the sixth century: it is an

⁵⁷ ChLA 1, n. 5.
⁵⁹ Jean Mallon considered it as the rest of the letter g and presumed the presence of the word signum. The same opinion has the editor of ChLA 1, n. 5, p. 8: “To left, under bene vale, the remains of a g visible (ca. 7 cm long). As Mallon suggests, this is probably part of the signum-line, which would have consisted of sig on the extreme left, and num on the extreme right, together with the name of the signatory, so that the chart would therefore
official letter, in which a certain Gammon asks a certain Paulus to protect the inhabitants of a village. It is written in Greek, in a chancery hand, and has two subscriptions in Latin language: one is of the scribe – Legi scribatur (with a solecism in scribatur); the other is, presumably, of the author of the letter, Gammon, who opens and ends his statement – Legi – drawing a staurogram.

have a very considerable width, since nothing of name is now recognizable. This reconstruction is hardly acceptable. The main difficulty involves the presumed presence of a personal name and of the word signum; if accepted, it would be a hapax legomenon, see Classical, Spätromische Grundlagen (see note 45) p. 75–76. If there are the remains of a letter g, the only possible reading is (le)g(iti). For the editor of ChLA 1, n. 5, the subscription is of the chancellor, for Mallon it may be of the scribe of the text.

Another case of subscription legimus is in the fragment P.Vindob. L. 148, edited in ChLA 45, n. 1350 without suggesting date and provenance. The Latin word legimus is preceded by a staurogram and written between two crosses with the vertical stroke longer than the horizontal; a similarity with another legimus from Ravena (ChLA 22, n. 721 and see below note 64) has been noted because of the presence of uncial letters, see ChLA 22, p. 35, note b.

In the case of subscription in form of a greeting – bene uale – the literal meaning of the sign of cross (the name of Christ) or of the staurogram (the visual evidence of the cross of Jesus) seems evidently to be headed towards the addressee (and, of course, the whole document too): In nomine Christi/In nomine crucis Jesu bene uale ('In the name of Christ' / 'In the name of the cross of Jesus', or 'of the crucified Jesus', be well). In the case of subscriptions in the form of statement – legi, complevi, recognoxi – the function of the Christian sign (staurogram, the most documented) written at the beginning of the phrase could be different. The literal meaning of the Christian sign is evidently headed to the statement itself: the invoked name of Christ or imagine of his cross makes sure that the action of legere or complevere or recognoovere has been performed in full faith ('In the name of Christ, the crucified, I have read, proofed, approved') and, at the same time, validates the truth of the statement itself.

Out of the field of the official documents and their subscriptions, another significant example can be found in P.Land. Inv. 161. It is a small piece of papyrus datable around the year 500: it was probably a card accompanying a gift. The text is a statement with a name expressed, presumably of the donor – Fil(iae) Symeonius cornicularius obtul(it) – written between two staurograms (Fig. 3). Here too, the function of the opening and closing symbol is probably to provide with truth the identity of Flavius Symeonius and what is declared in third person (obtulit, 'he offered a gift'): the text could have been written either by Flavius himself or by a secretary. However, the stronger meaning seems to be: 'Flavius offered (this gift) in the name of the crucified Jesus'. The shape of the two staurograms is remarkable: the vertical stroke of the letter rho is a thin long line and the horizontal one (that is the part of the monogram which represents the letter tau) is not drawn as a straight line (as it is usually drawn) but as
an elegant wavy line. The practice of writing such personal messages as well as that of writing individual subscriptions in letters and official documents seems to have made it possible to elaborate, in a personal way, the shape of the staurogram, to which a widespread (in books as well as in documents) and long-lasting usage had given a relatively consolidated structure.

The archive of the archbishop of Ravenna furnishes us with a considerable collection of private documents on papyrus dated to the Ostrogothic Kingdom (490–554) – usually seen as Italy’s last period of Roman-style stability – and to the later Byzantine period in Italy until the seventh century. Thus, the so-called Italian Papyri may represent a sort of bridge between Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages, between the Late Roman Empire and Lombard Italy. All the autograph subscriptions documented in the Italian papyri – written by the authors of the contracts, by the witnesses or by the *tabelliones*, who were responsible for writing the text of the document – present an initial (sometimes also a final) sign of invocation: it is generally in the form of the Greek cross, but the main form that occurred is the staurogram. It is reasonable to think that the sign maintained also in this case all its meanings as a Christian symbol. The most interesting feature we can observe in the subscriptions of literates of the Ostrogothic and Byzantine Italy is the morphology of the sign of the staurogram: its structure shows in many cases variants of shape as a result of different degrees of execution. Most of them concern the transverse stroke exactly how we have seen in Plandi. Inv. 161. A large number of variants involve also the loop at the top of the symbol, that is at the ‘head’ of the

visual evidence of the crucified Jesus.

The graphic elaborations of the sign of staurogram documented in the late Roman period can be seen then as a first phase of a future successful development.

The practice we found in the Greek private documents on papyrus from Egypt of the early Byzantine period is substantially similar to that which is documented in the Italian papyri: the presence of the staurogram as opening (and sometimes as closing) sign in subscriptions is relevant.

With regard to the original charters survived from the Merovingian Gaul, Lombard Italy and Visigothic Spain after the seventh century it could be said that literates began their own subscriptions drawing a cross but, more frequently, a staurogram, in the same shape we have seen in the Latin private documents documented in the Italian papyri of the sixth and seventh centuries and in the Greek documents preserved in the Egyptian papyri. In the Italian Papyri we can observe, as mentioned above, a variety in the execution of the staurogram and some developments of its ‘figure’, which remains nevertheless always recognizable. This is a valid reason to reconsider in some way the origin and formation of the signs of invocation drawn in Visigothic documents and in Lombard charters as well: it is possible to explain the graphic structure of those signs as a step of a process begun in the practices of the late Roman Antiquity in the West.

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66 See, for example, P.Ital. 37 (591) = ChLA 21, n. 7161 l. 73 and 77; P.Ital. 16 (seventh century first half) = ChLA 4, n. 240 l. 28, 38, 50, 60, 71 and 81.
67 Particularly in Oxyrhynchus: Notareunterschriften im byzantinischen Ägypten, ed. by Johannes M. Dietzert/Klaas A. Worp, Wien 1986, 1 p. 13. See also Griechische Papyrusurkunden (see note 32) n. 2683, 2687, 2689, 2691, 2694, 2695, 2696, 2697 and 2698 (subscription of the scribe of the document); n. 2682, 2687 and 2694 (subscription of the author of the document). The Greek documentary papyri from the Egypt of the sixth century are also evidence of the use of the staurogram as opening symbol of the whole text of the document, as we have seen above, note 48.
68 An exception to this late Roman and early ‘Barbarian’ *koiné* is the documentation attested for the Romans under the Vandals in Africa: the few signing lines of literates that have survived on the wooden tablets from Telesia are conceived without any sign of invocation: *Ego N. N. subscriptus*.
69 But see EISENHOLZ, Rekognitionszeichen (see note 29) p. 201–206. For the Lombard charters, see Antonella Ghignoli, Segni di croce e segni della mano nella cartella longobarda (forthcoming).
4. Writing in a different way: shorthand and other graphic signs as ending marks in autograph subscriptions

The constant presence of the cross or of the staurogram as initial marks in subscriptions (with the sole exception we have seen in Vandal Africa) can be considered one of the structural elements of a wide koiné generated among the writing practices in the late Roman empire, that emerges still vital and alive in the post-Roman West.

We observe that some signatories after the last word of their subscription, whichever alphabet they have used\(^{20}\), continue writing a text, but this time in shorthand\(^{21}\). In most cases in this way they communicate again their own name, but sometimes also something else that however remains almost invariably obscure to us. This second message appears, in fact, written not only through tachigraphic notes, but also through crossed lines drawn as interlocking pieces of a complex structure, which is impossible to ‘read’ and to understand. This graphic ensemble ends up having a very characteristic shape, like a special complex forming a unique sign.

In all subscriptions documented in our sources the first ‘block’ (the initial Christian sign, whether cross or staurogram) and the second one (the text of subscription itself) are always present; however, not all the literate were able to complete that third ‘block’ consisting in a further, concentrated microtext written in shorthand (that is in a system of codes completely different from that of Greek and Latin alphabet) and/or in a complex special graphic structure (Fig. 4).

More significant than an occasional absence is the fact that the final block emerges, in the late Roman period, both in the Greek private documents on papyrus of the Byzantine Egypt (in the notarial subscription)

\(^{20}\) For subscriptions written in Latin language but in Greek alphabet, an example in ChLA 21, n. 714 (Ravenna, 575 febr. 25\(^{th}\)); for subscriptions in Gothic language and Gothic alphabet, an example in ChLA 20, n. 704 (Ravenna 551). For subscriptions in Greek language written partially in Latin script, see Notarsunterschriften (see note 67) p. 14.

\(^{21}\) In general, for the period before the fifth century, useful survey is Hans C. Tettler, Notari und Exegeten. An Inquiry into Role and Significance of Shorthand Writers in the Imperial and Ecclesiastical Bureaucracy of the Roman Empire (From the Early Principate to c. 450 A. D.), Amsterdam 1985; for greek shorthand see Herbert Boeh, Griechische Tachygraphie und Tironische Noten, Hildesheim 1974; for latin shorthand see David Ganz, On the History of Tironian Notes, in: Tironische Noten, ed. by Peter Ganz, Wiesbaden 1990, p. 35–51. The best survey on the Tironiana in the Early Middle Ages, with bibliography and historiographical accounts, in Martin Hellmann, Tironische Noten in der Karolingerzeit am Beispiel eines Persius-Kommentars aus der Schule von Tours (MGH Studien und Texte 27), Hannover 2000, p. 1–98.

and in the Latin Italian papyri of the Ostrogothic and Byzantine Italy; and in the post-Roman period, both in the Merovingian documents and, more rarely, in the Lombard ones. The structural similarity of the final complex sign in Greek subscription from Egypt of the sixth century, in the Latin subscriptions from Ravenna of the same period and in the Latin subscription from Frankish Gaul of the seventh century is absolutely remarkable\(^{22}\). The instances survived from the Lombard Italy of the eighth century are a little different, because the graphic constructions of tachigraphic notes at the end of subscription appear much simpler; they do, however, exist\(^{23}\).

Two aspects then must be stressed here. First, as regards the graphic aspect, we see that substantially nothing differentiates the subscription of a notary from that of a literate signor involved in some way in the document: at least the Italian papyri show that clearly\(^{24}\). The second aspect re-

\(^{22}\) For examples from Egypt, Ravenna and Gaul, see respectively Notarsunterschriften (see note 67) 1 p. 50 n. 21.3.1, Taf. 15 (Arsinoites 663); PItal. 6 (Ravenna 575) = ChLA 21, n. 714, l. 6; ChLA 13, n. 558 (Clichy, 654 June 22\(^{nd}\)), subscription of Chradoberchus (p. 38 without indication of line).

\(^{23}\) The most famous (and unique) Lombard evidence is in the subscription of a bishop of Pisa, ChLA 26, n. 803 (Pisa, 748), recently discussed in Antonella Ghignoli, Su due famosi documenti pisani dell’VIII secolo, in: Bollettino dell’Istituto storico italiano per il Medio Evo 106,2 (2004) p. 25–27. Another evidence is in a charter of the end of eighth century from the capital of the Carolingian regnum Italice (Pavia, 792), ChLA 28, n. 857: Baro completes his autograph subscription with a group of tachigraphic notes crossed each other (l. 26: but the editor of ChLA 28, n. 857 does not recognize it as such).

\(^{24}\) See for example PItal. 36 = ChLA 21, n. 715, l. 61 and PItal. 6 = ChLA 21, n. 714, l. 6.
gards the use of tachigraphic notes. The survival of tachigraphic notes and Tironian notes in the pragmatic literacy of the post-Roman West is a problem for which it is hard to see an easy solution. But one point can be made: writing in shorthand must be thought, at least in the fifth to seventh centuries, as a widespread ability (both in Ostrogothic and Byzantine Italy and Byzantine Egypt), not exclusively associated to notarii and exceptores. The Italian papyri demonstrate that literate merchants and people of the middle class - like the viri honesti - had at least a basic knowledge of shorthand, so that they could employ it to mark their subscriptions: a direction for analysis could be to assume that a shorthand based on a simplified vocabulary was perhaps employed in business and commerce, as far as they could exist in Ravenna in the sixth and seventh centuries; however it could be thought also for the Lombard Italy.

Regarding the function of all that might be contained in this ‘third’ block, it can be guessed that it was added in order to make it easier to identify and recognize the subscription as autograph by the signer himself (and not by others) in case of a trial. ‘Writing’ the ‘third block’ was not compulsory: this is evident. Thus, after having finished the text of the subscription, there became a space available on the line for the signer, in which he could give his own view of himself by writing, even though in not ordinary way. Identifying and understanding those graphic codes, therefore, would mean having a possibility of correlating the type of tachigraphy employed (syllabic notes, Tironian notes) to a specific social or cultural context.

5. The late antique XMΓ and the ‘doodles’ of the Early Middle Ages

The sequence of Greek letters $XMΓ$ has been the subject of many investigations since at least the late nineteenth century. It appears widespread throughout the south-eastern regions of the Roman Empire from the fourth to seventh centuries on a wide range of media - brick stamps, amphora necks, graffiti, sculptures, door lintels and papyri, in a large variety of contexts, written almost all in Greek language and Greek script, sometimes in association with a cross or with a staurogram or with a Christogram, or with the isopsephism composed of the Greek letters $koppa$ and $theta$, whose numerical equivalent was 99 and stands for ἀρνή (amen).

Scholars still debate over the origin and exact meaning of XMΓ in certain contexts. Some see the symbol as an isopsephism, but the arguments of this interpretation are intrinsically weak. The majority of scholars, however, see the symbol as an acrostic but there is uncertainty about the interpretation and several abbreviated phrases have been proposed as possible meanings: $Χ(ριστός) Μ(αρία) Γ(έννα)$, $Χ(ριστός) Μ(αρίας) Γ(έννα)$, $Χ(ριστός ὀ ἑκς) Μ(αρίας) Γ(έννηδες)$, $Χ(ριστός) Μ(αρία) Γ(άμμα) Χ(ριστός) Μ(αρίας) Γ(έννηται)$.

There is a general agreement, however, that it was a Christian catchword or marker therefore it was not imperative in the investigation that only one rendering be preferred; probably the symbol had different meanings at different times and in different geographical areas.


28 A significant example is the inscription dated 606/7 on a monastery church in Mu‘ilq, north-east of Anasartha, in the Roman province of Syria, which testifies to continuing resistance to the Persians and to imperial investment in fortifications, given the senatorial rank of the person who built the church; the text of the inscription is preceded by the following group of signs: + $XMΓ XMΓ$ ++. See: The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars 2: AD 333–630: A Narrative Sourcebook, ed. by Geoffrey Greatrex/Samuel N. C. Lieu, London 2002, p. 245 and 322, note 41.

29 The numerical equivalent of the Greek letters $XMΓ$ is 643, which could correspond to the numerical value of several Greek phrases: θεὸς δοξασθείς (God is help) is the solution preferred.


The chi-mu-gamma group (and the alternative forms of the symbol such as the KMG and ΘMG)\(^{82}\) is well documented in papyri both in magic spells and prayers and in letters and legal documents. In the first group of texts the apotopistic value of the symbol is evident (Fig. 5)\(^{83}\). In letters the acrostic appears centred above the first line\(^{84}\) and it can be found in the same position in legal documents, where it sometimes appears also at the beginning of the contract, near the datation\(^{85}\). Besides having an apotopistic value, in this second group of sources the symbol has undoubtedly also the function of an invocation of Christ, an expression of devotion and religiosity.

The cryptogram is not an exclusively matter for Greek papyrologists. Jan Olof Tjäder has pointed out the presence of XM\(\Gamma\) (more precisely <\(\chi\pi\nu\), because it is written in cursive minuscule script) in three Latin legal documents on papyri from Ravenna dating from the sixth to seventh centuries – P.Ital. 30, P. Ital. 6, P. Ital. 25 – and therefore this symbol becomes interesting to us too.

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82 See Robinson, KMG and ΘMG (see note 81). For other alternative forms (such as the X2M\(\Gamma\), XΘ\(\Gamma\) or even XM), more rarely documented, see Derda, Some Remarks (see note 80) p. 24–26.

83 An example of such text is the amulet P. Oslo 5 (Fig. 5), datable to the fourth or fifth century. Another papyrus amulet with the symbol XM\(\Gamma\) is discussed and edited in Nongbru, The Lord’s Prayer (see note 80) p. 64–68: the group XM\(\Gamma\) is written here four times in a row, the three letters are in ligature and each group shows a different execution of the ligature between X and M.

84 Blumel, Lettered Christians (see note 22) p. 47–48.

85 Some examples among many in Griechische Papyrusurkunden (see note 32), n. 2680, 2682 and 2690 with Tat. V–VII. In the document n. 2690, datable from the sixth century, the cryptogram is preceded by a Greek cross and the letters are written in ligature.

In P.Ital. 30\(^{86}\), a contract of sale, dated to the year 539, \(\chi\nu\varphi\gamma\) stands, written by the notary, at the end of the text of the document after the so-called short final datation: \(\textit{Actum diae et quinguisae p(ost) c(onsulatum) s(upra) s(critpi). Ravennae, \(\chi\nu\varphi\gamma\). It occurs in the same position in the much later P.Ital. 25\(^{87}\), which is a fragment of a donation and long-term lease (an \textit{emphyteusis}) datable to seventh century, but here it is preceded by a staurogram: \(\textit{Actum Ravenna, imperio, anno, die et indictione s(upra)s(critpi) ita. (Staurogram) \(\chi\nu\varphi\gamma\). It is noteworthy that in other papyri we can find a set of three Greek crosses or a set of three staurograms written by the notaries in the same position, after the so-called short final datation: for example, in P.Ital. 31 (Ravenna, 540, where the three Greek crosses can be seen also as three Greek letters \(\chi\) and in P. Ital. 28 (Ravenna, 613–641)\(^{88}\). It is significant also that in the chartae of the Lombard Italy (and Merovingian Gaul too) the expression \textit{felicitcr} – the so-called \textit{appreciatio} – will stand exactly in the same position occupied in the Italian papyri by the \(\chi\nu\varphi\gamma\)-group (P.Ital. 30, 25) or by the set of three Greek crosses and staurograms.

The \(\chi\nu\varphi\gamma\)-group is not however traced by the notary in P.Ital. 6\(^{89}\), which we can say is a contemporary of P.Ital. 30. It is a will dated 575 February 22th, the testator is a Goth, Manna son of Nanderit. Here the \(\chi\nu\varphi\gamma\)-group appears at the end of the subscription written in Latin by one of the seven witnesses, Quiriacus \textit{vir honestus}, a superintendent of a storehouse (\textit{orrearior})\(^{90}\). The witness Andreas, \textit{vir honestus}, completes his subscription, however, drawing a set of three Greek crosses\(^{91}\). Also the witness \textit{P}ερσος completes his subscription written in Latin language but in Greek alphabet drawing a set of three Greek crosses\(^{92}\). Two other witnesses, Iohannis \textit{vir strenus} and Riccitanc \textit{vir clarissimus}, write after the last word of their subscription in Latin alphabet a microtext in tachigraphic notes containing their own name between, respectively, two Greek crosses and two staurograms\(^{93}\).

Jan Olof Tjäder has argued that the \(\chi\nu\varphi\gamma\)-group in the three Ravenna papyri – P.Ital. 30, P. Ital. 6, P. Ital. 25 – is “certainly a matter of the importation of Byzantine scribal practice. It is conceivable that those who wrote,
even though they were not aware of the phrase χι(vος) μ(ου) χ(αμας), nevertheless believed they were expressing the idea ‘written with my own hand’94. Given the consistent meaning which the cryptogram had in the contemporary sources of the Greek part of the late Roman world, this interpretation does not have sufficient arguments95. There is no reason to reject the view that the group of Greek letters was employed also in the Ravenna papyri as a graphic Christian symbol of blessing like a cross or a staurogram. Moreover it is not necessary to postulate an importation from Byzantium, given the ‘universal’ value which such composite symbol had throughout the Christian Late Antiquity.

What is really worth considering in the matter of the presence of χαμας in the Italian papyri is the palaeographical aspect. The notary of P.Ital. 30 and the witness of P.Ital. 6 are expert at writing Greek, if not literates in that language: the notary of P.Ital. 30 probably completed the group tracing an additional sign (Fig. 6), but in that point the papyrus is damaged96; Quiromanus borrarius traced the symbol in the alternative form of χαμας (Fig. 7), therefore is it likely that the phrase in his mind was Χ(αμας) μ(ου) χ(αμας), ‘let Christ be my witness’98. In the later document – P.Ital. 25, 

94 Tjader, Christ, Our Lord (see note 76) p. 171.
95 The interpretation μ(ου) χ(αμας) was suggested by Carl Wessell, Griechische Papyri des British Museum, in: Wiener Studien 9 (1887) p. 252–254, but it is generally rejected also for the occurrences in the Greek documentary sources.
96 Probably the notary traced a sign composed of a set of diagonal lines crossed each other; this graphic device is evidently a χ-based symbol and is quite common in Italian papyri. I do not agree with the reading of Tomasz Derda, who sees a letter sigma between chi and mu: Derda, Remarks (see note 80) p. 23.
97 I agree with the reading proposed for this passage in P.Ital. 6 in Derda, Remarks (see note 80) p. 23. Tjader edited χαμας in P.Ital. 6 and in ChLA 21, n. 714.
98 See Gostoli, Una nuova ipotesi (see note 81) and Robinson, KMII and ΘMII (see note 81). It is possible also the interpretation Χ(αμας) μ(ου) χ(αμας) Γ(εχει) presumably the most common: see Derda, Remarks (see note 80) p. 24; see also Nencini, The Lord’s Prayer (see note 80) p. 67, note 18.

where the group stands at the end of the text, after the dating – the notary draw it in cursive, without lifting his calamus and it is evident that he was not expert at writing Greek, probably he was not literate in Greek. The result is an uninterrupted chain, a series of connected lines and loops (Fig. 8). The “mécanisme visuel” employed by scribes who “pratiquent exclusivement l’un ou l’autre des systemes graphiques simultanés”99 is a well-known form of imitation in a situation of “multigrafismo assoluto”100. In P.Ital. 31 of Januar 540 from Ravenna101 the vir devisor Flavius Severus Junior completed his subscription tracing a graphic device: it can be considered the fourth occurrence of the χαμας-group in the Italian papyri (Fig. 9)102. It is evident that Flavius Severus Junior was not literate in Greek and that he was not able to write in Greek alphabet, but he was certainly intended to write the symbol χαμας at the end of his subscription; he made an effort to imitate the ‘original’ shape of the group103. From a

99 Cavallo, Écriture greque (see note 5).
100 For the concept see Armando Pietri, Funzione della scrittura e terminologia palaeografica, in: Palaeographica, Diplomatica et Archivistica. Studi in onore di G. Battelli, Roma 1979, p. 10.
101 The facsimile in ChLA 20, n. 707, l.14.
102 It is ignored, however, both in P.Ital. 31 and in ChLA 20, n. 707.
103 The two strokes of χ are not perfectly diagonal (the sign looks like a Greek cross), but the letter is recognisable; the attempt to trace χ in ligature without lifting the pen emphasizes the loops at the top and and the bottom of the traced line. Moreover, Flavius completed the graphic device tracing and additional sign of three chi each other: see above note 96.
strict palaeographic point of view the graphic group traced by Flavius is as pseudo-χρη. We can probably guess at presence of pseudo-χρη in several other occurrences in the Italian papyri, at the end of a subscription or at the end of the short final datation of the document, where only ‘doodles’ (‘ghi-rigori’ or ‘svolazzi’ in the lexicon of the Italian palaeographers, ‘Schnörkel’ in that of the German ones) seem apparently to be traced (Fig. 10)\textsuperscript{104}.

The shape of these graphic groups is surprisingly similar to that of the ‘doodles’ that often mark typically the end of the text of the document (and after the datation as an alternative to the *appreccatio* formula, feliciter) and sometimes also the end of a subscription in the early medieval charters, and in particularly in some cases from eighth-century Italy\textsuperscript{105}. Even though the conjecture is based only on palaeographical observations and

\textsuperscript{104} Some examples: P.Ital. 36, l. 49, l. 54 (= ChI.A 21, n. 715); P.Ital. 43 (535–542), l. 39 (=ChI.A 29, n. 864); P.Ital. 24 (ca. 650), l. 20 (=ChI.A 29, n. 865); P.Ital. 13, l. 78 (=ChI.A 29, n. 880).

\textsuperscript{105} For example, in ChI.A 30, n. 897 l. 21: at the end of a subscription (S. Lorenzo a Vaccoli, 720); ibid. n. 911 l. 2 (Lucca, 737), after the appreccatio, feliciter.

few occurrences in erratic sources, I would hypothesize that what is indicated and called ‘doodle’ in some Lombard charters is actually a graphical transformation (or imitation) of what, in origin, was the Greek cryptogram χρη, undertaken by literates who did not know other written languages than the Latin written and spoken in eighth-century Italy, but who knew concretely what that graphic symbol was and what that graphic symbol meant.

In conclusion, the original χρη – with all the complexity of its religious and apotropaic meanings, collected in its long life and widespread existence in the written practice of the late Roman world – had been changing its original shape as ‘signifier’ (meant in the sense of Saussure’s linguistic terminology), but it did not change its ‘signified’ in the Latin scribal practice of the Ostrogothic and then Byzantine Italy: as demonstrated by the Italian Papyri of the sixth and seventh centuries. If we are willing to look at ‘doodles’ – in this case at the Lombard doodles – as something which is worth considering as ‘writing practice’ as well as alphabetical words, then it can be surmised that a graphic device originated by the transformation of the χρη-group at least in the Ostrogothic period remained somehow and somewhere in Italy after the Lombard invasion, presumably as sign with the same original apotropaic value.

There is a general tendency toward alphabeticentric bias, which characterizes palaeographical studies and too often it happens that what appears as something other than a written line is classified as ‘doodle’, if it is not immediately recognizable as ‘sign’. So it happens that ‘ghi-rigori csornativi’ and ‘Schnörkel’ are implicitly elevated to a fixed category of palaeographical objects, characterized by their certain ahistorical nature. The early medieval pragmatic literacy is a historical issue, therefore not a single written line on a charter is to be presumed a priori as being merely decorative or
superfluous, drawn by literates or illiterates who were bored or thinking about something else¹⁰⁶ rather than writing something 'significant'.

Abstract


¹⁰⁶ Definition of doodle in Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary: “meaningless scrawls or scribbles, while one is or ought to be paying attention to something else”.