

John PETRUCCIONE

A Medieval System for Deciphering Latin Syntax: *Reginensis 321* and the Dot and Stroke System

The syntax glosses in Latin manuscripts have received scant attention. Distinct from glosses that explain the meaning of words or phrases or comment on ideas, the syntax glosses provide clues to the structure of complex Latin clauses, especially, though not exclusively, in poetical texts. While other sorts of interpretive glosses, perforce, employ words, the various systems of syntactical glosses employ letters of the alphabet, numbers, dots (singly and in successions of two to six), strokes, and other symbols as well as words. Since their presence has seldom been noted in published descriptions, we still lack any means of estimating how often they appear in extant texts and cannot speculate on the extent to which they were used in the Middle Ages. While reading medieval commentaries on Prudentius, I discovered an elaborate system of syntactical glosses based on sequences of dots and strokes in the Vatican's *Reginensis 321*, a ninth-century manuscript of uncertain provenance. I suspect that the numerous editors and critics who have cited this codex have failed to report this aspect of its rich interpretive apparatus because they have mistaken the syntactical glosses for musical notation, which also appears throughout the manuscript. In addition to reporting the discovery of this new evidence, I shall attempt to re-examine the explanatory potential of the dot and stroke method of sequential syntax markers and, in the process, further our understanding of the way this system guided the medieval reader.

Earlier descriptions of this sort of glossing have underestimated its explanatory potential. This is because it necessarily disposes of far fewer symbols for indicating syntactical sequence than other contemporary systems such as that using the letters of the alphabet. Nonetheless, the glosses of *Reg. 321*, if read properly, provide so much information that a reader cognizant of Latin semantics but unsure of the details of morphology can construe the syntax by placing the words in a more easily comprehensible order: first, conjunctions; then, verbs and subjects; then, direct and indirect objects—nouns and their attributives juxtaposed; and finally, adverbial expansions. The resultant re-ordering may represent either the sequence of the words in a translation into Old Irish or Anglo-Saxon or that in what was felt to be an entirely straightforward Latin sentence in which position, as much as morpheme, indicated function.

The analysis will raise issues relevant to the study of all systems of syntactical glossing: the difference between syntactical glosses necessary to construe clause structure and other sorts of glosses and the importance of this distinction; some syntactical clues that have so far been overlooked; and, perhaps most important, the relationship between syntax glosses and the different marks of punctuation. All the various systems of marking syntax are more complex than we have so far realized. Finally, one should note how syntax markers may point to larger issues of interpretation: they reveal interpretations that to most modern readers will seem certainly wrong, others that will seem possibly right but surprising, and still others that look certainly right and better than those of some recent editors. Clearly our handbooks on Latin palaeography must be rewritten to include a chapter on this important phenomenon.