SATOR AREPO = GEORGOS HARPON

I. Introduction

In his recent (1978), exhaustive—87 column long—PW RE article,¹ Heinz Hofmann provides the historians of Graeco-Roman religions with a complete evidence on the famous—and elusive—Sator magic square (= SS). The charm is a perfect four-entry palindrome—to be read either horizontally or vertically starting from each corner of the square. It consists of the magic number of five words with five letters in each (5²):

\[
\begin{array}{cc}
S & R \\
A & O \\
T & T \\
E & E \\
R & S \\
\end{array}
\]

It is surprising, however, to learn that Hofmann, after discussing countless attempts at solving the SS—being advanced since 1823²—, in conclusion adopts and strongly defends (558.57 ff.) the solution proposed by Hildebrecht Hommel (in 1952)³—as “die einzige, methodisch wie historisch richtige und mögliche Erklärung des Satorquadrats” (560.34 ff.). Following an old French anonymous suggestion (going back to 1854), Hommel assumes that the SS was written bustrophedon (zigzag) and, in addition, that the middle word tenet should be read twice: Sator opera tenet : (tenet) opera Sator, which he translates, “Der Schöpfer


The present paper has a double objective. First, I shall argue against the interpretation of the SS advanced by Hommel and defended by Hofmann. In my opinion, it simply sweeps under the rug the strange proper name Arepo (along with rotas). Second, I shall suggest that Arepo is a latinized form of a Kurzname of the extremely popular “god of good luck” in the Graeco-Roman Egypt—Harpon, Arpo(cras), Harpo(crates), i.e., “Horus-the-Child” (in Egyptian Hr-p²-hrd)—, in other words, a manifestation of the old god Horus, “the master of magic” (’3 ḫk₃). Accordingly, our Zauberformel, apotropaic charm, or φυλακτήριον would mean: “The sower Horus/Harpocrates keeps in check toils and tortures” (e.g., Ἀρπων ὁ σπείρων κατέχει πόνους καὶ τροχοὺς).

Apparently, the earliest known attempt at interpreting the SS belongs to a Byzantine scribe (end of the XIVth century), who on fol. 60v of cod. Par. gr. 2511 (Bible) wrote:

\[
\begin{align*}
\sigma \alpha \tau \rho \rho \quad & \text{o speírwv} \\
\alpha \rho \epsilon \pi \nu \quad & \tilde{\alpha} \rho \tau \tau \nu \quad \text{(sic)} \\
\tau \nu \epsilon \tau \tau \quad & \kappa \rho \alpha \tau \varepsilon \\
\delta \pi \epsilon \rho \alpha \quad & \epsilon \gamma \alpha \\
\rho \omicron \tau \alpha \varsigma \quad & \tau \rho \chi \omega \upsilon \sigma
\end{align*}
\]

I.e., “The sower holds the plough, the works, the wheels.” Now, unless the Byzantine scribe knew more than we do today, the most likely source of inspiration for his interpretation *arepum = āροτρον is Columella De rer. 5.1.6 (= Isidor. Orig. 15.15.4, p. 485 Lindsay): arepennis—a Gallic word for “half-acre” (compare semi-iugerum, “half-juger,” “quarter-acre,” and French arpent, “an acre”).

However, although this *arepum, meaning either “plough” or “half-acre,” is to be found nowhere, it still lives, e.g., in the Th.L.L., s.v. arepo. So does the attempt of the Byzantine scribe—in numerous modern interpretations of the SS—from F. Scolari (back in 1825) 5 and Charles

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4 Lexikon der Alten Welt, s.v. Satorformel, 2705.
5 Nuova dichiarazione dell’iscrizione Sator..., Verona, 1825: “Il seminatore di un arepo (piccola pezza di terra) mantiene con suo lavoro il convento” (i.e., “la Ruota” of the Monastery Maria Magdalena near Verona). Compare Cippola (supra, n. 2), l.c.