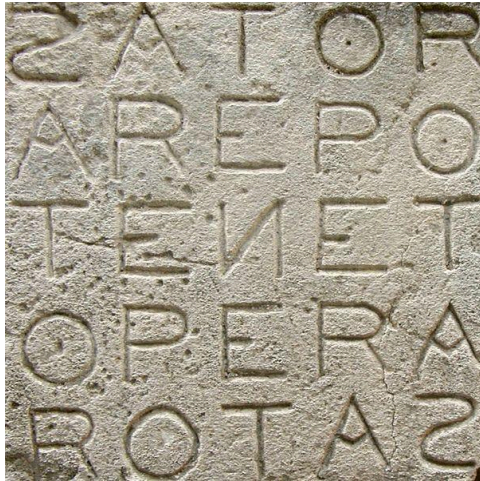


## The Sator- Rotas Square: Roman Word Puzzle or Magic Spell?

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(Sator Square on a stone wall, Oppède Le Vieux, France 13<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century)

The Sator-Rotas square, also known as the Rotas-Sator square or templar square is an inscription that has been found on five continents, with its earliest archaeological find dating back to Pompei in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. (Sheldon, 2003) The cryptogram consists of a five by five grid consisting of the words "Sator", "Arepo", "Tenent", "Opera" and "Rotas." Many different translations have been suggested over the years, but one of the broadly acknowledged translations is:

Sator - farmer/gardener,

Arepo – name (proper noun),

Tentet – holds,

OPERA – works

Rotas - wheels.

“The Farmer/Gardener Arepo holds and works the wheels/plough” (The Sator Square, 2013)

When these words are stacked on top of each other, they can be read as a palindrome in multiple directions. This palindrome grid became exceedingly popular in medieval Europe as a Christian occult symbol. It can be found carved in walls, written on papyrus, etched into wood disks, inscribed on cloths and written in clay tablets.



(Medieval German Fire Tablets, Oberhaus Museum)



(Stone charm 1583 – New York Archaeological Trust 2018-1019)



(Samson and the Lion 12<sup>th</sup> c. Collegiate Church of Saint Ursas, Aosta, Italy)

One early hypothesis suggested the square was a Christian invention, since the letters can also be used to form the words “Pater Noster”, the name of the Lord’s prayer in Latin. However, as more early Roman examples were found, the more evident it became that the palindrome predated Christian beliefs. Debate is still out as to what exactly this pattern is and what it means. The current widely accepted hypothesis is that at its origin, the square was simply a Roman word puzzle, as puzzles and anagrams were popular. Later, as medieval Europeans began to romanticize the ancient cultures and occultism, it became a religious and mystic symbol. To this day you can find countless arguments on the squares meaning which attempt to apply varying translational methods including linguistics and history, mythology and even numerology and mathematics.

As a mystic symbol the Sator-Rotas square was somewhat of a panacea, with its magical uses ranging from a way to extinguish fires, to protecting women in labor, to curing insanity. In medieval Germany their use as fire extinguishers is well documented. It was believed that if you inscribed the puzzle on a wooden disk and threw it into the fire, the fire would extinguish. It is

also listed as a cure in many healing manuals, for example the De Rerum Varietate from 1557, suggests that if the square were inscribed on three crusts of bread and consumed, sanity would return to your patient. (Sheldon, 2003) Rather than attempting to scribe upon bread crust for an arts entry, I have decided to focus on an English application as a protective amulet for women in childbirth.

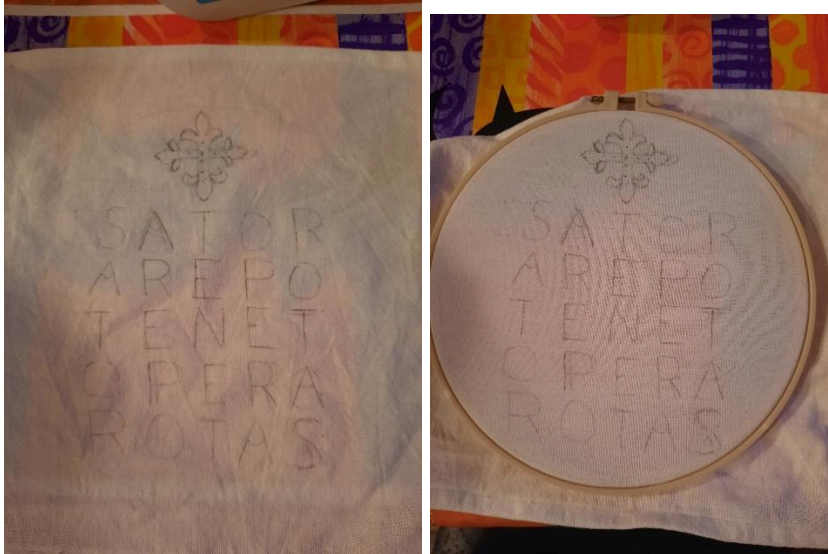
#### Recreating a Sator Square:

One of the uses of the square recommended in medieval healing texts suggested inscribing the text onto cloth then placing it on the belly of a laboring woman to protect her during labor and birth. (Kieckhefer, 2021)

I have chosen to inscribe on cloth via embroidery. As a part of the “Tortoise and the Hare” style arts competition, one must first enter their first attempt at a new artistic skill. I have quite insistently avoided embroidery both in the SCA and mundane world up until this point, and it is decidedly NOT a part of my normal skill set.

My plan is relatively simple, I will write out the Sator Square, add a cross for embellishment, and attempt a stem stitch to complete the letters. I will be doing it as black work. The intention is to eventually finish the cloth with a beaded edge, just to add decorative

flare. There are no extant fabric Sator squares to reference, as fabric does not tend to hold up over time, so I am using period written descriptions and my own artistic interpretation.



One of the first things I noticed immediately when starting to sew was that my penciled letters were definitely not as uniform in size and position as they appeared. I did a fair amount of adjusting as I stitched. In the future, I would want to use a more precise grid form and

measurements to really stack the letters consistently. Overall this was much more fun than I anticipated, and I may even dread embroidery slightly less in the future. Who knows, maybe I'll even inscribe some bread crusts.

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