

# Dmitri Borgmann's *rotas* square articles

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The *rotas* square (or alternatively, *sator* square) is a Latin palindromic word square, known from various medieval and ancient inscriptions:

R	O	T	A	S		S	A	T	O	R
O	P	E	R	A		A	R	E	P	O
T	E	N	E	T	or	T	E	N	E	T
A	R	E	P	O		O	P	E	R	A
S	A	T	O	R		R	O	T	A	S

The history and precise meaning of the palindrome has been a perennial subject of discussion in *Notes & Queries*<sup>1</sup> and other venues, both popular and scholarly. Among these other venues is *Word Ways*, the American journal of recreational linguistics, now in its 53rd year. In 1979 and 1980, *Word Ways* printed a series of articles on the early history, religious symbolism, and cultural significance of the *rotas* square and other palindromes:<sup>2</sup>

- D. A. Borgmann, 'Palindromes: The *rotas* square', *Word Ways*, xii 4 (1979), 195–201.  
D. A. Borgmann, 'Palindromes: The *rotas* prehistory', *Word Ways*, xiii 1 (1980), 11–16.  
D. A. Borgmann, 'Palindromes: The ascending tradition', *Word Ways*, xiii 2 (1980), 91–101.

The articles were attributed to Dmitri A. Borgmann, the noted American writer on wordplay (*Language on*

*Vacation*, 1965; *Beyond Language*, 1967) and former editor of *Word Ways* (1968). While they attracted little attention at the time, some 35 years after their publication (and 29 years after Borgmann's death), questions began to be raised about their true authorship.

The articles contain much internal evidence that, taken together, compellingly supports the notion that Borgmann was not their author. First, their subject matter is uncharacteristic of Borgmann, who had a keen interest in single-word palindromes, but not sentence-level palindromes as in the *rotas* square. Second, several passages in the articles mark them as being addressed to a British rather than American audience. For instance, one paragraph opens with the observation that both 'British and American' writers have been instrumental in composing and popularizing palindromes, but then goes on to discuss only 'the most important *British* practitioners' (emphasis mine). The articles also occasionally, but not consistently, use Commonwealth spellings ('behaviour', 'cancelling', etc.), suggesting that the original manuscripts were in British English and then imperfectly rendered into American English for *Word Ways*, either by the submitter or the editor. Third, and perhaps most convincingly, the style of the articles is unlike anything Borgmann or *Word Ways* had ever published before. While *Word Ways* positions itself 'on the midpoint of a spectrum from popular magazine to scholarly journal',<sup>3</sup> the *rotas* articles are dense, erudite, impersonal pieces. They are replete with citations to scholarly journals and critical editions in various foreign and dead languages, not all of which Borgmann was known to read. Much of the articles' terminology would have been unfamiliar to *Word Ways*'s readership – for example, there is their repeated use of the term 'recurrent verse', a peculiarly classicistic synonym for 'palindrome'.

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<sup>1</sup>The following represent a small selection of this journal's contributions on the *rotas* square:

H. B., 'Squaring the circle', *N&Q*, 2nd S. viii 203 (1859), 421.  
Sphinx, 'Palindromes', *N&Q*, 4th S. xii 293 (1873), 116–117.  
E. Marshall, 'Pew inscription at Great Gidding', *N&Q*, 8th S. vii 163 (1895), 105.  
J. H. MacMichael, 'Palindrome', *N&Q*, 10th S. iii 69 (1905), 310.  
S. K. Eastwood, 'Roman square palindrome', *N&Q*, iii 1 (1956), 45.

<sup>2</sup>Open access to these articles is available on the journal's website: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/wordways/>

<sup>3</sup>B. J. Winkel, 'Word Ways, a journal worth going your way', *Cryptologia* i 3 (1977), 232–4.

In short, the articles have all the hallmarks of the meticulously researched academic prose of a British antiquarian journal or monograph.

Apart from this internal evidence, there is the matter of how the articles came to be published in *Word Ways*. According to A. Ross Eckler, Jr., the journal's then-editor, Borgmann had a 'ponderous' sense of humour and would often submit material under a fanciful assortment of letterheads and pseudonyms. One such submission was the *rotas* square manuscript:<sup>4</sup>

His landmark article on the history of palindromes and the SATOR square, appearing in *Word Ways* in 1979–1980, was sent to me under the name of David R. Williams, a member of the National Puzzlers' League who had been mentioned in passing in *Word Ways* shortly before. It took a letter to Williams to satisfy me that I had been spoofed.

Eckler never explained how Borgmann's name came to appear in the byline of the articles – that is, whether this was done at Borgmann's request or whether Eckler had merely assumed that he was the author. While it is unlikely that Borgmann wrote the *rotas* articles, it is unlikelier still that he would have falsely asserted authorship: as a respected and extremely prolific writer, he would have had nothing to gain, and much to lose, from such an act of plagiarism.

Most of the observations and arguments given above were set out in a 2014 article by James W. Puder.<sup>5</sup> Puder attempted to identify the true author and original publication details of Borgmann's *rotas* articles via an online literature search, but came up empty-handed. My own searches have been likewise fruitless. *Notes & Queries* having previously covered the *rotas* square, and its readership being familiar with British antiquarian scholarship, I hope this query may reach someone who can help solve this mystery. One final clue that may be of use: the latest publication date in the articles' references is 1977, so the original publication date of the *rotas* articles is probably some time between 1977 and 1979 (or perhaps up to a few years later, if what Borgmann submitted to Eckler was a work in progress or under review).

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<sup>4</sup>A. R. Eckler, Jr., 'Borgmann resurrectus', *Word Ways* xx 1 (1987), 3–4.

<sup>5</sup>J. Puder, 'Borgmann's "Palindromes" articles: A joke gone awry?', *Word Ways*, xlvii 3 (2014), 164–6.