Innovating Knowledge: Isidore's *Etymologiae* in the Carolingian Period

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1000 Worte Forschung: *An ongoing NWO VENI postdoctoral project (Feb 2018 – April 2021) in Manuscript studies, Huygens ING, KNAW, Amsterdam*

The *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville were the first and perhaps the most influential medieval encyclopedia. This ambitious work produced in the early seventh century in Visigothic Spain covered all areas of formalized knowledge, starting from the Liberal Arts, medicine and law, and extending to animal and plant realms, buildings, vehicles, everyday objects, and pastimes. It is not surprising that the *Etymologiae* attained significant popularity within decades of their publication and maintained it until the end of the Middle Ages. The testimony to the importance of this encyclopedia to medieval intellectual life is perhaps that as many as 1,200 manuscripts, manuscript fragments, and derivates of the work survive from the seventh to the fifteenth century. Approximately 350 of the surviving witnesses come from before the year 1000, the majority of them from the Carolingian period.

In fact, Carolingian masters and especially the efficiency of Carolingian scriptoria may have been crucial for the promotion of the *Etymologiae* as the universal encyclopedia and for its
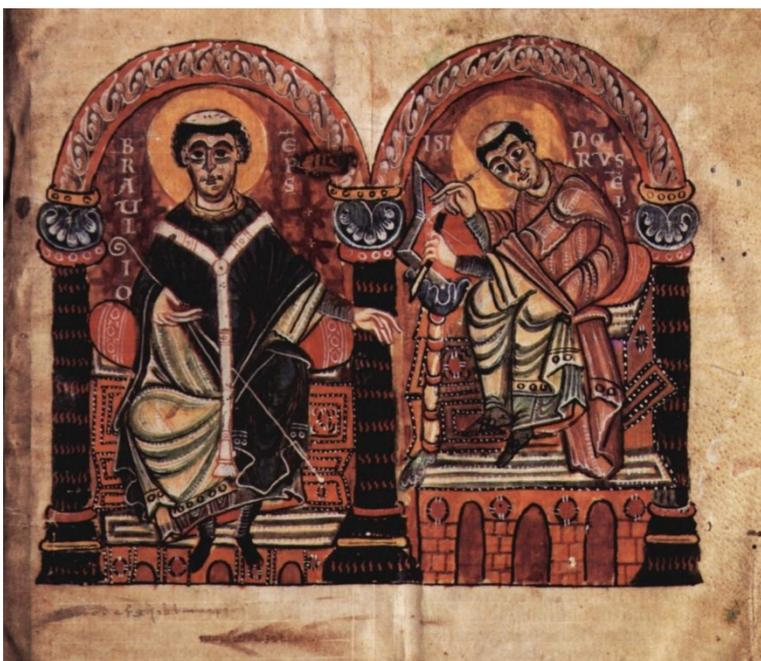
Fig. 1: *Bishops Braulio of Zaragoza (left) and Isidore of Seville (right) working on the Etymologiae, Einsiedeln, Stiftsbibliothek, MS 167, p. 1. Source: Wikimedia Commons,* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isidore_of_Seville#/media/File:Meister_des_Codex_167_001.jpg. *Licence: none (Public Domain).*

lasting success in the Latin West. We are not talking here only about the raw numbers of manuscripts that were produced by Carolingian scribes, nor is this just a matter of how geographically widespread the work became thanks to its Carolingian readers. Far more interesting for research is the open nature of the encyclopedia, the fact that its users felt free to update and rework it as they saw fitting and as a result left behind ample traces in the manuscripts of their appropriation of Isidore's work. In fact, it is possible to talk about 'Carolingian *Etymologiae*', the embodiments of Isidore's encyclopedia that reflect its appropriation in the Carolingian environment and therefore have the power to inform us about the Carolingian intellectual world, perhaps more so than about the seventh-century intellectual world of Isidore of Seville.

The 'Carolingian *Etymologiae*' and the process of what may be termed the 'wikipedization' of the encyclopedia in the early Middle Ages are two of the main focuses of my project. I plan to examine the surviving Carolingian copies of the *Etymologiae*, not in order to reconstruct the archetypal text as it may have existed at the time of Isidore in Visigothic Spain but to seek traces of appropriation by later generations up to the end of the early Middle Ages, with a special emphasis on the Carolingian period. Those features and elements that editors and textual scholars would traditionally call interpolations or contaminations will be for me rather innovations, revealing how readers engaged with Isidore's massive knowledge corpus and how the changing world and its novel needs left an imprint on this first medieval universal encyclopedia. I hope to study not only what has been altered, but also when, where, and who engaged in such an act of appropriation and what it reveals about the changing intellectual landscape of the early Middle Ages – the rise of new ideas, new trends, new emphases, new sources, and new techniques, as well as of new strives, controversies, and tensions. In other words, one of the intentions of the project is to create an interactive and commented catalogue of innovations that appear in selected sections of the *Etymologiae*, a map capturing some of the transformations of the knowledge landscape that took place in the early Middle Ages, and especially in the Carolingian period.
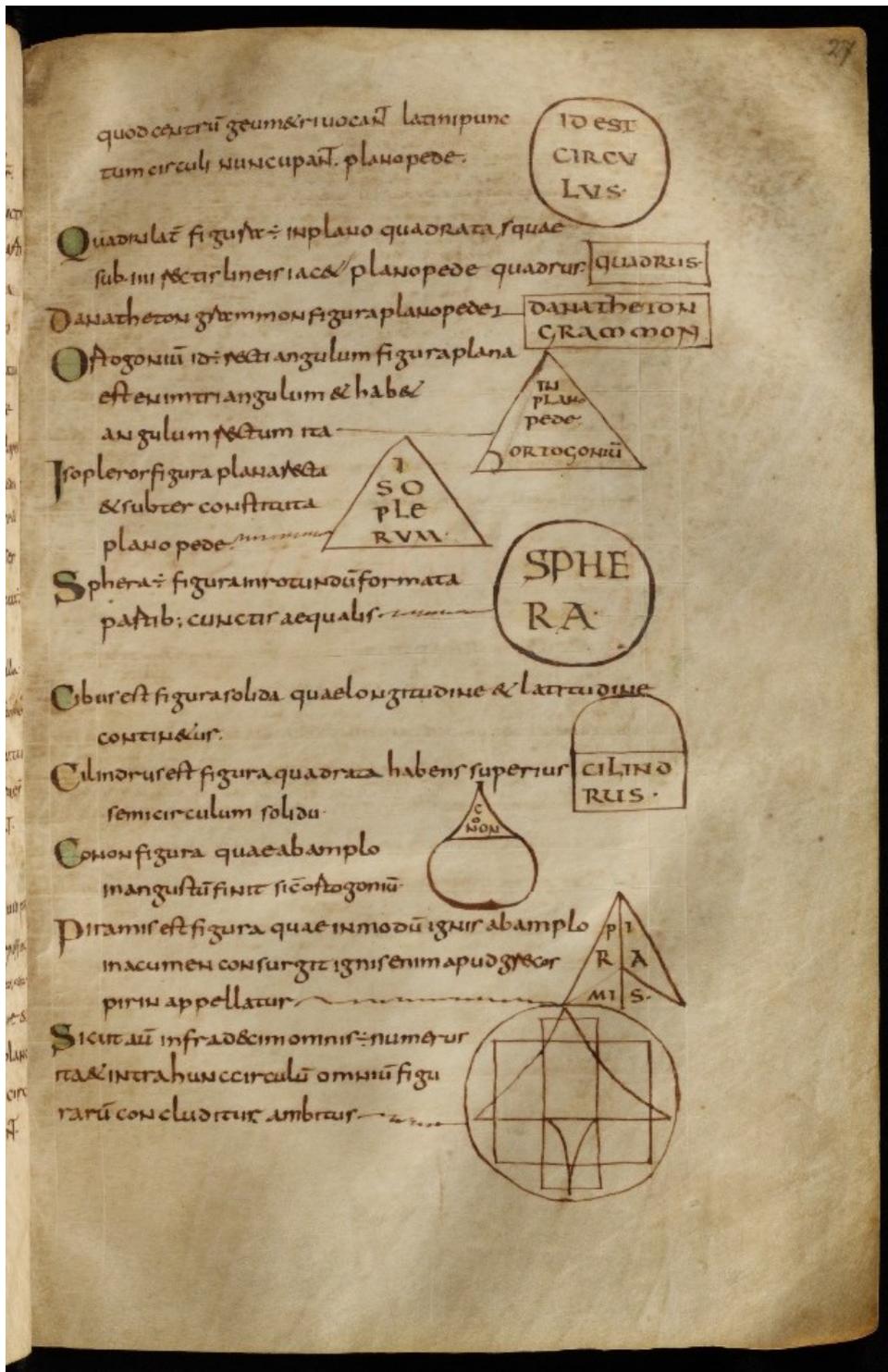
Fig. 2*: Geometric diagrams added to book 3 of the Etymologiae,*
Basel, Universitätsbibliothek, F III 15: Isidorus, Etymologiae, lib.
II-XIX, fol. 27r.
Source: https://www.e-codices.ch, DOI: 10.5076/e-codices-ubb-F-
III-0015. Licence: none (Public domain).

Even at this stage of my project, it is clear to me that many of the innovations, which appear in the roughly 350 manuscripts that are the scope of my project, do not appear in isolation. It is rather clear that many of the innovations are shared by multiple manuscripts, suggesting that they traveled. This indicates that those responsible for them were connected and engaged in the exchange of ideas and trends. The tracing of this flow of innovation in the Carolingian environment is another goal of my project. In fact, it is a necessary continuation of the quest for understanding how innovations emerged, as reflected in the body of the *Etymologiae*, and how their emergence reflects on societal, political and religious change in the early medieval world. The key term here is 'intellectual network'. With a total of more than 350 surviving early medieval manuscripts, it should be possible to carry out a large-scale examination of innovations that appear in more than one manuscript and track their dissemination. Such an approach promises to reveal the contours of networks that facilitated intellectual exchange. It will perhaps be even possible to examine the configuration of these networks in order to assess how it may have influenced what was passed on and what was not, how far novelties traveled, how many centers they reached, and how long they remained in circulation. Why do particular innovations that can be traced to Carolingian period, such as the separate transmission of the first book of the *Etymologiae*, seem to have been particularly widespread in the ninth century but do not seem to have lasted much longer? Why, on the other hand, do other innovations, such as a specific scholarly redaction from St. Gallen seem to have not been copied at all in the ninth century – there is but one copy, the archetype – but became regionally influential in the following centuries? Why are there almost no glossed manuscripts of the *Etymologiae* from the German area, but many from France? And how come that these glosses spread rapidly to England, but not to Italy or Germany?

The study of the 'Carolingian *Etymologiae*' is, thus, first and foremost an exploration of the Carolingian intellectual landscape. By tracing the emergence and spreading of specific influential innovations of this encyclopedia, the project hopes to analyze how innovations emerged and spread more generally. It may ultimately bring us closer to understanding the phenomenon known as the Carolingian Renaissance.