

## Context

In order to understand the meaning of a neume element or significative letter in the St. Gall manuscripts, we must first consider the context. To illustrate this concept, let us examine the use of the symbol found above the number 3 on modern American keyboards, known variously as the pound sign, hash (or hatch) mark, or the number sign. The symbol has a clear meaning when it precedes a number (e.g. “#5” = “number five”) and a different, yet equally clear, meaning when it follows a number (“5#” = “five pounds”). Because of its similarity to the diesis, the symbol can also be used in musical shorthand, as in “G#” (g-sharp).

Likewise, in the manuscripts of St. Gall, context tells us how to interpret certain symbols. For example, when isolated on one syllable, the virga [ / ] normally represents a long duration (or one syllabic beat). When the virga appears as part the climacus [ / ], it is assumed to be *short* unless otherwise indicated. This concept is somewhat complicated by the idea of *positive versus negative indication*.

Let us look at two common road signs for examples: NO PARKING and STOP. The presence of a STOP sign is a positive indication that one must stop. In no case would there be a STOP sign where one was not required to stop. However, there may be other situations where one must stop even if the sign is not present, such as at the end of a small side street when making a turn onto a major thoroughfare. Thus, the presence of a positive indication always requires its observation, while its absence may or may not. Likewise, the use of a negative indication, such as the NO PARKING sign indicates that one would normally assume that parking would be allowed. It would be unnecessary for the St. Gall copyist to add a c (celeriter) to an already short note form unless the short form were sometimes used to indicate long notes.

In certain manuscripts the virga which forms the final note of the scandicus [ / ] always appears with a positive indication of length (the episema) in certain frequently used formulas. That this indication of length is missing in other manuscripts does not necessarily suggest different rhythmic interpretations. In these cases, the scribe likely felt that the correct rhythm would be widely understood without the additional indication.