Elisa De Roberto

# Inscriptions in Italian Literature

## 1 Introduction

Developing classic and Old Testament motifs, Italian literature of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries recovers and reinforces the profound symbolism linked to the book as object. It can be a treasure trove of science and knowledge, a monument capable of opposing the flow of time and mortal things, a mirror of human interiority (as we see in Dante's *Vita nova* or Petrarch's *Familiares*), and even an allegory of the universe (*Paradiso*, XXXIII, 85–88).[1] However, we must not forget that other types of writing frequently played important roles in medieval life. Italian scholars have for a long time (and often using interdisciplinary perspectives) turned their attention to the *scritture esposte*,[2] what Dante refers to as *visibile parlare* ("speaking visibly") in the *Commedia*,[3] which is to say texts written on "public" surfaces not intended primarily to accommodate writing. Scholars have considered epigraphs, inscriptions and graffiti on walls, tablets or memorial plaques for their historical, artistic and literary value, but also as important sources for the study of ancient Italo-Romance varieties.[4]

Two Roman *scritture esposte*—the inscription of the catacomb of Commodilla (first half of the ninth century) and the inscription accompanying the fresco of the underground basilica of St Clement (end of the eleventh century)—represent some of the earliest examples of writing in an Italian vernacular.[5] Furthermore, the *scritture*

**1** About the book as symbol in European medieval literature see Curtius 1948, ch. 16.

**2** The notion of *scrittura esposta* was elaborated by Armando Petrucci; it deals with any type of writing conceived to be placed in a "posizione propriamente 'esposta' agli sguardi dei frequentatori di quegli spazi, al fine di permetterne la lettura a distanza, anche collettiva", see Armando Petrucci 1997, 45–58. See also Petrucci 1985, 85–97. Considering the specificity of this category, which is linked with a specific tradition of studies, I have preferred here to keep the Italian term.

**3** The expression *visibile parlare*, which Dante uses to allude to the dialogues that take place between figures depicted in a bas-relief, appears in *Purgatory* X, 95: *Colui che mai non vide cosa nova* / *produsse esto visibile parlare,* / *novello a noi perché qui non si trova* ("he, whose ken nothing new surveys, produc'd / That visible speaking, new to us and strange / The like not found on earth"). On ekphrasis in Dante's work, see Lombardo 2009, 99–120. In Italian studies, Dante's expression has been used to refer to texts that include pictorial vignettes or that are written on a medium other than parchment and paper. See Ciociola 1992 and Pozzi 1997, 15–41.

**4** In Italy various research projects are aimed at the linguistic study of medieval epigraphs, as for example the *Epigraphic Vernacular Database* (Nadia Cannata/Luna Cacchioli/Alessandra Tiburzi 2019). A study of medieval Latium epigraphy is in D'Achille 2013, 19–117. On the Venetian inscriptions, see Tomasin 2012, 23–44.

**5** On medieval *scritture esposte* see Casapullo 1999, 193–200 and Koch 1999, 399–429; for the following centuries, see D'Achille 2008, 279–307 and the panorama outlined by Francesca Geymonat 2014, 57–100. On the catacomb of Commodilla, see Sabatini 1987, 7–34.


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*esposte* reveal different sociolinguistic levels. Spontaneous graffiti (i. e. not official inscriptions but those affixed at the initiative of an individual), such as the cases studied by Luisa Miglio and Corrado Tedeschi,[6] feature diaphasic and diastratically low levels of expression, for instance. In this sense, the interest in medieval *scritture esposte* is not only an attempt to conceptualise the framework of vernacular writing in a more complex and dynamic way. It is also influenced by recent studies in the history of the Italian language that focus on "hidden Italian",[7] a variety of non-literary Italian with a rather unstable physiognomy, diffused among people of different social strata, and able to serve many communicative functions. This attention to "speaking visibly" has allowed us to trace writers other than those traditionally considered the guardians of writing (the literati, notaries and merchants) who also played a fundamental role in the constitution of a vernacular culture.

The *scritture esposte* do not exhaust the scope of medieval inscriptions. Dissenting from Favreau's view of epigraphy as a long-lasting form of communication aimed at a wide audience,[8] Livio Petrucci drew attention to types of writings not meant to be preserved for the long term and lacking a communicative intent. These are written on materials less durable than stone or marble, such as cloth, gold or organic materials (wood, leaves, bones, meat, etc.), vulnerable to the ravages of time. Inscriptions can also be found in hidden places, engraved on the insides of bells, preserved inside tombs, and engraved on amulets not easily accessible to human sight. Such inscriptions, of which there are often only casual or indirect testimonies, constitute the identity of the object and show that writing is not always made to be read.[9] Precisely these testimonies of "ephemeral" writings[10] and those inaccessible to the gaze of others allow us to recover an often forgotten dimension of writing, one related to the pictographic origin and symbolic meaning of script.

In the Italo-Romance corpus of texts, the label of "narrated inscription" can be applied to *scritture esposte* (engraved or frescoed) on stone artefacts, to objects described in fictional works, chronicles or other types of texts, and even to a whole series of writings of a private character, whose functions range from formulas for

**6** See Miglio/Tedeschi 2012, 605–628 and Tedeschi 2014, 363–381.

**7** See Testa 2014.

**8** Robert Favreau states that "[e]pigraphy has very often been defined as the science of what is written on a durable material and, in fact, inscriptions are most often drawn on stone, on metal. But the support is in itself indifferent: embroidery, tapestry, glass (stained glass), pottery, bone, stucco, wood, slate, etc., and some of these supports are not strictly speaking resistant or durable. To define epigraphy, one must therefore start not from the form, but from the functions of the inscription. [...] Epigraphy is the science of what is written—it is its etymology—in order to communicate some element of information to the widest public, and for the widest duration" (Favreau 1997, 5, TdA).

**9** See Petrucci 2010.

**10** According to Cardona 1981, 56–60, these must also be considered among the *scritture esposte*: private inscriptions (e. g. inscriptions in a ring), ephemeral inscriptions (e. g. inscriptions in sand or written without ink), "epiphanic" inscriptions (like the *mene, tekel, peres* in Daniel 5:26). On epiphanic inscriptions, see §§ 4 f.

possession to thaumaturgical formulas, incantations or particular types of anagrams or symbols. In these cases, writing acts on reality through the manipulation of symbols, establishing a link between written symbols and concrete action. These are inscriptions in which the material enhances the effectiveness of the word: the *verbum* seems to draw body and substance from the surface on which it is fixed through writing, contributing to the performative function of the text-bearing artefact.[11] Sacred and magical inscriptions are mentioned in imaginative literature, but also in the hagiographic and religious corpus and in pragmatic texts designed to transmit a particular body of knowledge (such as recipe collections or books of secrets).[12]

The following classification proposes a first distinction between official versus private inscriptions, where + indicates that the feature (visibility, officiality, the intention to endure) is (or may be) present, and the—indicates that the feature is not (or is not necessarily) present.

**Tab. 1:** Inscription Classification.

| Type of inscription | Visibility | Officiality | Intention to endure |
|---|---|---|---|
| Captions of figurative texts | +/– | + | + |
| Dedicatory and commemorative inscriptions | +/– | + | + |
| Admonitions | + | + | + |
| Statutes | + | + | + |
| Personal graffiti | + | – | + |
| Formulas of *possessio* | +/– | – | + |
| Incantations | – | – | – |

This table is inspired by Francesco Sabatini's much more complex classification of vernacular inscriptions in medieval Italy.[13]

The classification shown in the table is conceived primarily for real inscriptions that exist outside of the texts as material and historical objects. To analyse and

**11** See Centini 2016, 38: "la parola, sia essa voce generatrice o scrittura, giungendo dalla divinità può assumere le valenze caratteristiche del suo creatore e di conseguenza possedere essa stessa il potere di potere alla vita quanto evoca".

**12** Here we find several magic formulas for healing certain diseases or producing magical rites. Often these formulas must be written on pieces of cloth, on animals' organs or on somebody's skin. See § 5.

**13** Depending on the articulation of various criteria (the relationship between inscription and images; the relationship with the reader; the communicative function), Sabatini comes to identify several concrete types of inscriptions: 1) explanatory captions of "stories" (also with dialogic inserts), 2) texts integrated into figurative representations and involving the reader and/or the author, 3) statutory texts (and similar), 4) inscriptions of dedication, commemoration, ex voto, 5) inscriptions of warning, pride, insult, threat or invitation (see Sabatini 1997, 185).

properly study narrated inscriptions it is also useful to consider discursive traditions in order to recognise the specific functions of narrated inscriptions in texts.[14] In the Italian Middle Ages, four major categories of discourses are relevant to the study of the narrated inscriptions: (1) imaginative literature (narrative and lyrical); (2) historical and travel literature chronicles, *itineraria,* etc.); (3) hagiographic and religious literature; (4) magical instructions (pragmatic texts).

The following analysis of narrated inscriptions in Italo-Romance will proceed by separating these discursive traditions, despite the numerous crossings and contaminations that may exist between one discursive universe and another. Nevertheless, this categorisation makes it possible to identify the textual traits and functions that unite the narrated inscriptions belonging to the same tradition, and to establish the role they play in shaping the text that harbours them. This chapter is concerned with texts written in any Italo-Romance variety, with particular attention to Tuscan, from the first literary attestations in the twelfth century until the end of the fourteenth century (including the work of Franco Sacchetti, who died in 1400).[15] During this period, the Italian linguistic landscape is profoundly multilingual, with no vernacular more prestigious than the others. Only during early modern Humanism did the Tuscan language gradually became established, which led to the standardisation of the written language.

In the following sections I will cover narrated inscriptions according to the discursive genre in which they feature because very often certain types of inscriptions tend to concentrate in particular genres. Historiographic texts and travel literature, genres that claim authenticity, will raise questions about the historic existence of the narrated inscriptions. From a general point of view, narrated inscriptions are always both true and always false. They are always true, because their phrasing is inspired by linguistic acts that contemporaries must have felt to be likely: for example, a tomb epigraph is situated in the context of a recognisable tradition and genre, regardless of whether the precise inscription is a historical artefact or not. Even behind clearly fantastic or miraculous inscriptions, it is possible to trace the echo of ritual behaviour and historically determined gestures. On the other hand, narrated inscriptions are always false, because when mentioned in a text different from the original context

**14** Here we refer to the concept of discursive tradition elaborated, on the basis of Coseriu's linguistic theories, by Brigitte Schlieben-Lange and Peter Koch, in reference to the genres and types of text, written and spoken, as well as to the discursive universes (religion, science, history, etc.) and to those communicative norms that cannot be ascribed to the norm of a single historical language, but which constitute the expressive knowledge of a given individual or groups of individuals. See Schlieben-Lange 1983 and Koch 1997, 43–79; see also Wilhelm 2001, 467–477.

**15** Tuscan is the variety for which we have more documentation, also because of the particular economic and social conditions that led to the development of a very fertile literary environment in medieval Tuscany specifically, which reaches the height of its prestige in the fourteenth century thanks to the figures of the *Tre Corone* (Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio). For a periodization of the Italian language see Tesi 2001, 8f.

for which the inscription was conceived, its functions and purposes change. Furthermore, the concept of historical reality is not suited to some genres, such as hagiographic and miracle literature, which tends rather to represent the intervention of the divine in the order of reality, or magical recipe books, which aim at the manipulation of reality. Clearly, in these cases what interests us is to reconstruct practices and knowledge produced through narration.

## 2 Literary Texts

It has often been suggested that the birth of Italian literature is delayed compared to other Romance languages; this delay concerns in particular the formation of prose narration, which for a long time, at least until the *Decameron* (1349–1353), is almost exclusively dominated by vernacularisations from the Latin and translations (and rewritings) of texts from beyond the Alps. In contrast, literature in verse emerges earlier. Beginning with the Sicilian tradition, Italian poetry has since its beginnings been strongly linked with troubadour poetry, from which it takes up and re-elaborates themes and styles.

We therefore begin our examination of the inscriptions narrated in the vernacularisations to highlight how these textual entities result from the interaction of different traditions (mostly Latin and Christian). The translations of prose romances of Breton material or of classical material in various vernaculars (Tuscan and Venetian above all) reformulate themes, images and motifs typical of romances in the *langue d'oil*. The stories of the deeds of noble knights give rise to frequent references to sumptuous funeral monuments and tomb epitaphs, some of which are very elaborate. This is the case in the *Palamedés pisano*, which features a nexus of tombs where each plaque shows the name of a knight and his statue:

> *Oro v'avea assai senssa fallo e argento, ma altre ricchesse non avea indelle tombe, se nno che in ciascuna avea intagliato un cavalieri e 'l suo nome. L'una dicea:—Qui giace Laimors, figliuolo di Febus, lo non pari di tutti li cavalieri.—E indell'autra tomba era scritto:—Qui giace Matas, figliuolo di Febus, lo non pari di tutti li cavalieri.—E indell'autra tomba era scritto:—Qui giace Siraoc figliuolo di Febus, lo non pari di tutti li cavalieri.—E indell'autra tomba era scritto:—Qui giace Altan lo bello, lo forte, che fu figliuolo di Febus, lo non pari di tutti li cavalieri* (II, X, 53)[16]
>
> There was gold and silver, but no other wealth, except that in each tomb was carved the silhouette of a knight and his name. One said:—Here lies Laimors, son of Febus, unrivalled among all knights'. The other said:—Here lies Matas, son of Febus, unrivalled among all knights:—The other said:—Here lies Sirac, son of Febus, unrivalled among all knights. The other said:—Here lies the beautiful Altan, son of Febus, unrivalled among all knights.

**16** I provide a loose translation of those works for which it was not possible to find an English translation.

Each epitaph that one of the main characters, Breus, comes across bears the typical inscriptional formula: "Spatial deictic + stative verb + anthroponym + epithets". The sequence of epithets may relate to both physical and moral qualities of the knight, as well as to his descendants. In the example above, the recurrence of the expression "*the* unrivalled + partitive" is also striking. As we can see, the epitaphs can easily be translated literally due to the formulaic character of these texts, which dates back to Latin funeral epigraphy.

Similar formulaic expressions can also be found on the tombs of lovers described in *Tristan riccardiano*, a loose translation of the *Tristan en prose* (1280–1300): it is the sepulchre that Marco has built in memory of Tristan and Isolde. In this case the inscriptions accompany life-size metal statues of the two lovers. The precise description of the two statues also reveals the names of Tristan and Isolde carved into the plate of Tristan's sword and into the middle of the chest of the female figure:

> *Qui dice lo conto, che a piè di quella sipoltura fece fare lo re Marco due imagini, onde l'una era fatta in sembianza di cavaliere e l'altra di dama, e avievi lettere intagliate che dicieno: "Qui giace T. di Leonis, lo migliore cavaliere del mondo, e la reina Y., la più bella dama del mondo".* [...] *In mezzo della chiesa diritta mente era la sipoltura delli due amanti* [...]. *Al piè della sipultura giaceva due imagine diritte, di metallo intagliate, e erano quelle due imagine ciascuna così grande come uno uomo. L'una delle imagine era fatta in sembianza di cavaliere, sì bello e sì ricca mente aoperata, ch'elli era aviso a quelli che la riguardavano, che lo cavaliere fusse in vita. E elli teneva la sua mano sinistra dinanzi suo petto tutta chiusa, altresì come s'elli tenesse afibbiato suo mantello; e lo braccio destro teneva teso inver le genti, e teneva in quella mana* [*la*] *spada tutta nuda, ciò era quella spada medesima con la quale l'Amoroldo fue ucciso, e alo piatto della spada avia scritte lettere, che dicieno: T. L'altra imagine ch'era fatta in sembianza di donna, avea lettere in mezzo del petto che dicieno: Y.* (Appendice, 402)[17]
>
> Here says the story that at the foot of that tomb that king Marco had made there were two images, one in the resemblance of a knight, the other of a lady. And there were letters engraved with gold that said: "Here lies Tristan of Leonis, the best knight in the world and queen Isotta, the most beautiful lady in the world." [...] The tomb of the two lovers was in the middle of the church. At his feet lay two straight images, of metal, as big as a man. One was made in the shape of a knight and seemed alive. He held his left hand in front of his chest, as if he were holding his cloak; his right arm was outstretched and held an unsheathed sword (it was the sword with which he had killed Amoroldo). And on the sword were an inscription that said "T". The other image, which was in the shape of a woman, had letters in the middle of her chest saying "Y".

**17** Here is the French source, the *Roman de Tristan en prose*: *et avoit letres en l'ymages del cavalier, qui disoient: "C'est l'ymage de monsigneur Tristan", et en l'autre: "C'est l'image de madame la roine Yseut"* [...] *Et el plat de l'espee avoit fait faire li rois letres qui disoient: "Monsigneur Tristan". Et en l'autre, qui faite estoit en samblance de dame, avoit letres el pis qui disoient: "Madame Yseut"* (V, II/9, § 85, 202f.). It should be noted that in the Italian manuscript the names *Tristan* and *Isolde* are always abbreviated.

The same episode appears in the *Tavola ritonda*, which proceeds on to a unique rewriting, loading the sepulchre of the two lovers with other allusions. As demonstrated by Giulia Murgia, the translator-rewriter of the *Tavola ritonda* wanted to attribute to the monument of Tristan and Isotta the value of a reliquary:[18] King Marco in fact has the bodies of the two lovers embalmed, so that their memory becomes tangible through the conservation of the bodies. The monument is enriched with precious details: the statues are not of metal, but of gold; the figure of Isolde is adorned with a flower. Also the text of the inscriptions, reported through indirect discourse, differs due to added chronological details, which impart a greater realism to the scene and activate Christological references (Tristano was born in 333 and, as is recalled in another passage of the novel, dies at 33 years):

> *E a piede erano lettere intagliate, le quali contavano tutta loro vita: sì come egli erano istati morti nel CCCLXVIII anni; e sì come Tristano era nato nel CCCXXXIII anni, e la bella Isotta era nata nel CCCXXXVII anni.* (CXXX, 506f.)
>
> And at the feet were carved letters, which told their whole lives: how they had been killed in 368; and how Tristan was born in 333, and the beautiful Isolde was born in 337.

The epitaph takes on the features of a biography, and indeed, considering the miracle that is told later (from the hearts of the two bodies a vine is born),[19] seems to be a hagiographic narration (but see § 5).

A sacralisation of the sepulchre, according to modalities reminiscent of the cult of relics, also occurs in the *Facts of Caesar*, a fourteenth-century reworking in the Tuscan vernacular of the *Faits des Romains*:

> *Poi fece lo popolo fare una piramide, cioè una gran colonna quadrata di pietra numidiena, sopra quattro leoncelli di metallo, d'altezza di venti passi, e lassù messe la polvere del corpo di Cesare, in una mela di metallo dorata. Le lettere de la detta dicono così: "Qui giace lo padre del paese di Roma". Longo tempo facevano gli uomini quine sacrifizio, e tutte le stranie genti; e qui giuravano li Romani di loro cose e di loro discordie: "per Cesare così; e per Cesare altresì".* (VII, 67, 302)
>
> Then the people made a pyramid that is a great quadratic column of Numidian stone, over four small metal lions twenty feet high, and put the dust of Caesar's body there, in a golden metal apple. The letters say: "Here lies the father of Rome". For many years sacrifices were made here, and the Romans swore here invoking Caesar.

The epitaph engraved on the golden apple that holds the ashes of Julius Caesar is composed of the usual sequence of "deictic + stative verb"; a periphrasis takes the place of the anthroponym, which elevates Caesar as the father of Rome. The epitaph contributes decisively to the sacralisation of the place, as well as of the figure of

**18** Murgia 2015, 11–50.

**19** For the meaning and the sources of this motif, I refer again to Murgia 2015, 28–30.

Caesar (whose name becomes a formula for an oath). The narration mixes historical reality and medieval reconstruction. In reality, the monument described is not the true altar of Caesar, still visible in the Roman Forum, but the Egyptian obelisk brought to Rome by Caligula in 37 CE to adorn the circus of Nero-Caligola in the Vatican (today this obelisk is in the centre of Piazza S. Pietro). In the Middle Ages, the legend spread throughout Europe that the globe at the top of the obelisk was Caesar's cinerary urn, probably fuelled by the *Mirabilia urbis Romae*, thanks to which pilgrims and travellers could learn about Roman monuments.[20]

Sometimes an epitaph takes on considerable proportions. The following inscription narrated in the *Storia di Troia* (History of Troy) by Binduccio dello Scelto, a fourteenth-century vernacularisation of the southern redaction of the prose *Roman de Troie*, is the only element of the funeral monument on which attention is focussed:

> *De la beltà e de l'adornamento de la sepoltura non vi voglio fare longo contio, ché troppo sarebbe longha materia, ma egli avea sopra la sepoltura lectere intagliate in greco che dicevano così: "Qui giace Hector tutto intero, el quale Acchilles uccise non niente corpo a corpo, ché non fu mai nullo chavaliere né prima né poi verso cui elli non avesse suo corpo difeso: ch'egli era lo più forte e lo più ardito e lo più conbattente e lo più valente di tutti coloro che mai furo nati di madre. Di sua bontià e di sua cortesia e di suo valore non fu mai nullo né die essere. Elli uccise di sua mano molti re* [...]. *E s'elli fusse vissuto due anni senza più, tutti suoi nemici erano venti e distrutti e morti e confusi; ma aventura no lo sofferse niente né no lo volse."* (343, 361)
>
> I do not want to talk about the beauty of the tomb because it would be too long, but above the burial there were letters engraved in Greek saying: "Here lies Hector, killed by Achilles. There was never any knight before or since against whom he had not defended his life: he was the strongest and the bravest of all mortal men. Equal to him for goodness and nobility there was never anyone. He killed many kings by his hand [follows a list of the kings killed by Hector]. And if he had lived for two more years, he would have killed all his enemies, but Fate did not want it.

The epitaph is a short biography of Ettore, which shows a long list of enemies killed, ending with the bitter reference to the inevitability of fortune.

Also common are inscriptions of "talking objects", that is informative texts engraved on objects that play a particularly prominent role in the narrative. The vernacularisations from the French provide various examples for such text-bearing artefacts as well, demonstrating how well established this narrative ploy was. In the *Inchiesta del san Gradale* (a vernacularisation of the *Queste del Saint Graal*), the Siege Perilous bears the prophetic inscription:

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**20** *Iuxta quod est memoria Cesaris, id est agulia, ubi splendide cinis eius in suo sarcophago requiescit* [...] *Cuius memoria inferius ornata fuit tabulis ereis et deauratis, litteris latinis decenter depicta. Superius vero ad malum, ubi requiescit, auro et preciosis lapidibus decoratur, ubi scriptum est: "Cesar tantus eras quantus et orbis sed nunc in modico clauderis antro et hec memoria sacrata fuit suo more, sicut adhuc apparet et legitur"* (*Mirabilia urbis Romae*, 18; see Cesare D'Onofrio 1988, 72). For more on the *Mirabilia urbis Romae* see Christine Neufeld's chapter on architecture in this volume.

*e sì vi videro suso lectere che novellamente pareano scritte, che dicieno: QUATTROCENTO LIIIJ ANNI APRESSO LA PASSIONE DI GESÙ CRISTO, ALLO DIE DELLA PENTICOSTA DI' QUESTO SEGGIO TROVA' LO SUO MAESTRO.* (I, 23, 96)

There they saw letters which seemed to have been engraved recently and which said: "Four hundred and fifty-four years after the passion of Christ, on the day of Pentecost this seat will find its master'".

Subsequently the seat is covered with a drape by Lancelot, waiting for the prophecy to be fulfilled. A little further on we find another speaking object, the sword in the rock:

*et in quello petrone si avea una spada molto bella per sembranti, e llo pome di quella spada si era di pietre pretiose intagliata a letere d'oro molto riccamente. E lli baroni riguardano le lectere che dicieno: NULLO UOMO NON MI MOVERÀ DI QUIE SE NON QUELLI A CUI IO DEBBO PENDERE A LATO. E QUELLI SERAE LO MIGLIORE CAVALIERI DEL MONDO.* (I, 39, 99)

And in that rock there was a very beautiful sword, and the handle was of precious stones richly carved with golden letters. And the barons looked at the letters, which said: "No man will move me from here except he beside whom I must hang. And that will be the best knight in the world".[21]

In both cases the characters and the reader are confronted with an object that announces a proof that only a predestined one can deliver. Interestingly, the "magic" object reveals its potential directly, without the contribution of an intermediary. As we will see later, this is a typical aspect of some magical practices, but in literary texts the object that speaks through the inscription establishes a sort of mirroring between the reader and the character, in that they simultaneously acquire the information that the monument is designed to reveal.

A similar narrative technique is also crucial to the unveiling of inscriptional allegories. In the *Storia del san Gradale*, a very faithful rendition of Robert de Boron's *Histoire del Saint Graal*, King Evalac has a vision of a tree trunk from which three closely interwoven and inscribed trees are born:

*Alora il trase i· re medesimo verso suo letto, sì prese due ceri che ardeano dinazi e gli porta dinazi a' tre albori per riguardare e conoscere di che maniera e' poteano esere. Ma ciò videro eglino bene ch'egl'erano tre, e che il mezano ch'avea la lada scorza nascea del primiero, e che il te[r]zo uscia de l'uno e de l'altro. E i· re isgarda in alti, sì vide in ciascuno letere iscritte, l'una d'oro e l'altra d'azuro, e diceano le lettere del primiero albore "Questi forma"; e quelle de sencondo diceano "Questi salva"; e le letere del terzo albore diceano "Questi purifica".* (LXXXI, 3–5, 87)

The king took two candles burning in front of him to look at the three trees and know what they were. There were three trees and the one in the middle that had the ugly bark was born from the first and the third came out from both the others. And the king looked up and saw letters inscribed in each, the one in gold and the other in blue. The letters of the first tree said "This forms"; and those of the second said "This saves"; and the letters of the third tree said "This purifies".

**21** For additional analysis of this passage see Michael R. Ott's chapter on weapons in this volume.

The plant "One and Triune" is obviously a symbol of the Trinity: in fact the three branches embody the Father (who forms), the Son (who saves) and the Holy Spirit (who purifies). The gold and blue colours of the letters strengthen the Christian symbolism. These short sentences, carved in the tree bark, seem to belong to two distinct levels: they are indeed part of the story, but are at the same time explanations addressed to the reader, who thus takes on the sovereign's point of view.

Let us move now to consider narrated inscriptions in the original works of Italian literature. The genre of the tomb epitaph seems to be the most frequent type. In the *Filocolo* by Giovanni Boccaccio we find two statements that realise the narrative theme of the false death of the lover:

> *io non possa sanza te stare né giorno né notte* [...], *ma contento che nella mia sepoltura si possa scrivere: "Qui giace Florio morto per amore di Biancifiore", mi ucciderò* [...].
>
> *Nel qual tempio entrati, la reina mostrò a Florio la sepoltura nuova, e disse: "Qui giace la tua Biancifiore". La quale come Florio la vide, e le non vere lettere ebbe lette, incontanente perduto ogni sentimento, quivi tra le braccia della madre cadde, e in quelle semivivo per lungo spazio dimorò.* (III, 20, 282)

> I say to you that, since I cannot be without you day or night, I will be glad that on my tomb is written "Here lies Florio who died for love of Biancifiore" and I will kill myself [...].
>
> Entering the temple, the queen will show Florio the new burial and say: "Here lies your Biancifiore". As soon as he had seen this and read the false inscription, Florio lost all his senses, fainted into the mother's arms and remained in this semi-dead state for a long time.

The two epitaphs that are cited at different points in the text are connected via prolepsis and reversal. Florio in fact imagines his own burial and the inscription that will accompany it: this event recalls the episode of the false death of Biancifiore by analogy and antithesis. The inscription on the tomb of Biancifiore is also the narrative ploy with which Boccaccio has Florio learn of the false death of his beloved.

The motif of the future epitaph or imagined epitaph recurs in other texts as well. If pronounced in the first person, the inscription assumes the features of a will with which the person states a last and incontestable truth:

| | |
|---|---|
| *io farei scrivere nella mia tomba* | I would write in my tomb |
| *una scritta che direbbe così:* | an inscription that would say: |
| *"Chi vuole amare, li convien tremare,* | "Those who want to love, it is convenient to tremble, |
| *bramare, chiamare, sì come 'l marinaio in mare amaro* | crave, call, like the sailor in the bitter sea |
| *e chi no.m crede, mi deggia mirare per maraviglia,* | and those who do not believe me |
| *ché per amor son morto in amarore,* | must look at me because I died for love in bitterness, |
| *sì com'è morto Nadriano e Caedino;* | as Nadriano and Caedino died, |
| *però si guardi chi s'ha a guardare".* | but be careful who must be careful". |
| (324–330, 500) | |

This epitaph from the *Mare amoroso* (an anonymous Tuscan poem in loose hendecasyllables, written c. 1270–1280) utters first a maxim, and then a warning. Nadriano and Caedino are the corrupted names of two characters of French literature (Andreius and Ghedin), both famous for their unhappy and unrequited love.

At another point in the text the narrator asks the beloved woman to imagine the inscription that would accompany her effigy painted in the heart of the poet (according to a topos typical of the troubadour, Sicilian and Stil Novo lyric, but see § 4 below):

| | |
|---|---|
| *Certo, se voi poteste una fiata* | Certainly, if you could see |
| *veder*[*e*] *sì come il lupo cerviere,* | how the lynx sees |
| *che vede oltra li monti chiaramente,* | beyond the mountains, |
| *voi vedereste la vostra figura* | you would see your figure painted |
| *dipinta e suggellata nel mio core,* | and sealed in my heart, |
| *e lettere dintorno che diriano in questa guisa:* | and letters around it: |
| *"Più v'amo, dea, che non faccio Deo,* | "I love you goddess more than God |
| *e son più vostro assai che non son meo".* | and I am more yours than I am mine". |
| (38–45, 488) | |

Ciociola speaks here of *un'iscrizione quasi numismatica*, because the letters surround the figure of the woman as on a coin.[22]

With regard to the cases discussed so far, Dante develops a highly original take on epigraphy in the *Commedia*, in which inscriptionality pervades both narrative and style. Various studies have been interested in the epigraphic component that runs through the work, dwelling on both the inscriptions that Dante depicts during his journey and on the epitaphs that punctuate the appeals and speeches of the souls that the poet encounters. While there are only two inscriptions—the epigraph on the door of Hell and the inscription on the tomb of Pope Anastasius—there are countless cases in which characters of the *Commedia* resort to formulas and typical epitaphic styles to detain the figure of Dante-*viator*.[23] This phenomenon is particularly widespread in vernacular poetry, where so-called epigraph texts abound. They are constructed through stylistic features and formulas typical of funerary writing, apostrophes to the collective Everyman and the "direct, immediate transplant not only of Christian content, but also of a form that belongs to the system of Christian communication".[24]

**22** Ciociola 1992, 72.

**23** On the topic, see Ricci 1997, 433–458; Gorni 2003, 1–16; Giunta 2007, 149–167; Carrai 2010, 481–510. Carrai in particular thus expresses itself on the presence of the epigraphic genre in the *Commedia*: "È superfluo dire che il poema di Dante non è affatto una raccolta di epigrafi, altrimenti non avremmo di fronte la Commedia, ma i Tumuli di Pontano. [...] La commedia non equivale a una sorta di lapidario o di Spoon river anthology medievale, dal momento che il modello pur pervasivo degli epitaffi costituisce sì una funzione portante, ma riassorbita in un progetto più vasto, visionario e narrativo" (Carrai 2010, 501).

**24** Giunta 2002, 134 f.: "trapianto diretto, non mediato, [...] non solo di un contenuto cristiano [...] ma anche di una forma che appartiene al sistema della comunicazione cristiana".

The two physical inscriptions in the *Commedia* both use prosopopoeia: it is the stone itself that speaks. In the epitaph of Anastasius II, which launches the eleventh canto, set in the expanse of the cemetery of the city of Dis,[25] the tombstone reveals the identity of the deceased and declares that it guards the pope's body. According to Dante, Anastasius was induced by Fotino, deacon of Tessalonice, to follow the Monophysite heresy of Acacio, a legend that circulated widely during the Middle Ages and probably dates back to the *Liber pontificalis*:

*venimmo sopra più crudele stipa;*
*e quivi, per l'orribile soperchio*
*del puzzo che 'l profondo abisso gitta,*
*ci raccostammo, in dietro, ad un coperchio*
*d'un grand' avello, ov' io vidi una scritta*
*che dicea: "Anastasio papa guardo,*
*lo qual trasse Fotin de la via dritta".*
(XI, 3–9)

we came upon a still more cruel pack;
and there, by reason of the horrible
excess of stench the deep abyss exhales,
for shelter we withdrew behind the lid
of a large tomb, whereon I saw a scroll
which said: "Pope Anastasius I contain,
whom out of the right way Photinus drew".

Dante does not give us any further information about the life or personality of Anastasius, who does not even appear in the text, but is simply evoked by his tomb. Scholars have hypothesised that, recalling the figure of a heretical pope, Dante wanted to emphasise how even a religious could be guilty of the sin of heresy.[26]

The inscription that Dante reads at the gate of hell is also in the first person and differs from the standard epitaph by combining biblical allusions (the inferior door cited by Matthew 7:13), classical (Virgilian) ones (in particular, *Aen*. VI, 126–129),[27] but also references to daily life. As Battaglia Ricci points out, the text echoes the typical pattern of the admonitory inscriptions, mostly written in Latin, which stood on the open gates of the medieval city walls.[28] Similar texts, but with the opposite content, were also placed on the doors of the churches, which instead invited the faithful to enter the sacred place. Dante's inscription at the entrance to hell features a threefold anaphora at the beginning of the verses *(per me si va tra),* a figura etymologica *(dolente, dolore),* stark semantic contrast between the first and second triplet, a polyptoton *(etterne, etterno)*, and a final warning:

**25** In the city of Dite there is an expanse of tombs from which come the cries of heretics, which Dante depicts as dead among the dead. In fact, Dante gives particular prominence, especially in Canto IX, to a very precise type of heresy (the Epicurean one) that denies the immortality of the soul.

**26** See the discussion in Bertolini 1970.

**27** *Facilis descensus Averno: / nodes atque dies patet atri ianua Ditis; / sed revocare gradum, superasque evadere ad auras / Hoc opus, hic labor est*.

**28** See Ricci 1997, 452f. See also Christine Neufeld's architecture chapter in this volume.

*"Per me si va ne la città dolente,*
*per me si va ne l'etterno dolore,*
*per me si va tra la perduta gente.*
*Giustizia mosse il mio alto fattore:*
*fecemi la divina podestate,*
*la somma sapienza e 'l primo amore.*
*Dinanzi a me non fuor cose create*
*se non etterne, e io etterno duro.*
*Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate".*
(III, 1–9)

"Through me one goes into the town of woe,
through me one goes into eternal pain,
through me among the people that are lost.
Justice inspired my high exalted Maker;
I was created by the Might divine,
the highest Wisdom and the primal Love.
Before me there was naught created, save
eternal things, and I eternal last;
all hope abandon, ye that enter here!"

As Battaglia Ricci highlights, the triplet following the inscription deserves some attention:[29]

*Queste parole di colore oscuro*
*vid'io scritte al sommo di una porta;*
*perch'io: "Maestro, il senso lor m'è duro"*
(III, 10–12)

These words of gloomy color I beheld
inscribed upon the summit of a gate;
whence I: "Their meaning, Teacher, troubles me".

Here Dante enunciates his perplexity in the face of the *scrittura esposta*, which is defined as of "dark color": according to scholars, the chromatic detail refers to the "material" color of the letters (painted with a dark ink) or, in a figurative sense, to the ominous content of the inscription (according to a symbolic system also used by Bonvesin da la Riva in the *Tre Scritture*).[30] Another singular element is the contextual improbability of the inscription: in reality this type of inscription had to be in Latin; Dante instead decided to use the vernacular here, while employing Latin in other places in the *Commedia*, for example to represent the song of the angels. This aspect should not be underestimated because the inscription as we have seen recalls eternity (*io etterno duro*). Perhaps the choice of the vernacular is for stylistic reasons, clarity and effectiveness of communication, or perhaps Dante reports a practice that was establishing itself in his time, but the inscription of hell also contains literary allusions. It might not be a coincidence that inscriptions in the vernacular appear in the *Tesoretto* of Brunetto Latini on the doors of the palaces of virtues: "In a great stone finely written: 'Here dwells Fortitude'" (*in un gran petrone* / *scritto per sottigliezza* / *"Qui dimora Fortezza* [...]", XIV, 1296–1299).

An inscription *sui generis* appears in the XVIII Canto of *Paradiso*, one in which the souls of the sky of Jupiter are arranged in flight so as to compose the separate vowels and consonants that make up the Latin quotation *Diligite iustitiam qui iudicatis terram*, the first verse of the book of Wisdom:

**29** See Ricci 1997, 452–458.
**30** See also Malato 2005, 20. See also Christine Neufeld's architecture chapter in this volume.

*Mostrarsi dunque in cinque volte sette*
*vocali e consonanti; e io notai*
*le parti sì, come mi parver dette.*
*"DILIGITE IUSTITIAM", primai*
*fur verbo e nome di tutto 'l dipinto;*
*"QUI IUDICATIS TERRAM", fur sezzai.*
*Poscia ne l'emme del vocabol quinto*
*rimasero ordinate; sì che Giove*
*pareva argento lì d'oro distinto*
(XVIII, 88–96)

They then displayed themselves in consonants
and vowels five times seven; and as their parts
seemed to be said to me, I noted them.
*Diligite Justitiam* were first verb
and noun of all that was depicted there;
*Qui Judicatis Terram* were the last.
Then in the fifth word's M they so remained
arranged, that Jupiter seemed silver there
pricked out with gold.

The bodies of the blessed become an alphabet, creating a mobile and evanescent text whose last trace—the M—is transformed in turn into the symbol of the imperial eagle (M is in fact the initial of the word *monarchy*):

*resurger parver quindi più di mille*
*luci e salir, qual assai e qual poco,*
*sì come'l sol che l'accende sortille;*
*e quïetata ciascuna in suo loco,*
*la testa e'l collo d'un aguglia vidi*
*rappresentare a quel distinto foco.*
[...]
*L'altra bëatitudo, che contenta*
*pareva prima d'ingigliarsi a l'emme,*
*con poco moto seguitò la'prenta.*
(XVIII, 103–108)

more than a thousand lights appeared to rise,
and upward move, some much, and some a little,
even as the Sun, which setteth them on fire,
allotted them; and when they quiet were,
each in its place, an Eagle's head and neck
I saw portrayed by that outstanding fire.
[...]
The other blest ones, who at first appeared
content to form a Lily on the M,
went slowly on to shape the Eagle's form.

The metamorphosis of the letter M into an eagle confirms the existence in these triplets of a very pronounced calligraphic component. This detail can only be understood if one has in mind the form of M in Gothic epigraphical handwriting. The transition takes place, therefore, in the following stages:[31]

**Fig. 1:** Capital letter M.

**Fig. 2:** Shape of a Lily.

**Fig. 3:** Eagle.

**31** The images are taken from Dante Alighieri (1979), vol. III, 306–307n.

Even the intermediate figure of the lily is not accidental. According to some commentators, with the *m* adorned with lilies Dante wanted to allude to the house of France and its invasive policy; according to others the lily refers to the empire of Charlemagne; still others see in the lily a visual metaphor, similar to that of the white empyrean rose.[32] Exactly which tradition, reason or cue inspired Dante is unclear. However, we can note two aspects. First, the word formed by the blessed can be defined as epiphanic writing (see note 12 and the § 4) whose letters are apparitions, clearly emanations of the deity. In addition, Dante depicts an anthropomorphic, phytomorphic and zoomorphic alphabet, a calligraphic practice of which there are many examples in various medieval Western civilizations (and whose meaning is still far from clear).

The letter M is still at the centre of an alphabetic, visual game in the XXIII canto of *Purgatorio* (31–33). In the sixth frame, Dante meets the greedy, whose faces appear horribly skeletal, so as to make the letter M easily readable. Dante refers here to the widespread medieval opinion that man carried on his face the word *omo* (i. e. man): the two *o* would be represented by the eyes, while the *m* would be formed by the cheekbones and the eyebrows.

Dante's epigraphic model influenced other authors. I will not dwell on the very interesting theme of the iconographic rendering of Dante's inscriptions in medieval codices and works of art,[33] but will limit myself to Boccaccio's *Amorosa visione* (1342–1343). Between the end of the second and the beginning of the third canto of the allegorical poem, the poet and his female guide arrive at the gates of a noble castle. The first door, a narrow one, is topped by an inscription announcing a rugged climb, which is also "the way of life"; the second large, bright door, in contrast, bears an inscription in golden letters that promises earthly fame and glory, as well as the joys of love:

*E s'tu non credi forse che a salute*
*questa via stretta meni, alza la testa:*
*ve' che dicon le lettere scolpute –.*
*Alzai allora il viso, e vidi: "Questa*
*piccola porta mena a via di vita;*
*posto che paia nel salir molesta,*
*riposo etterno dà cotal salita;*
*dunque salite su sanza esser lenti,*
*l'animo vinca la carne impigrita".*
[...]
"[...] *Pon l'intelletto alla scritta ch'è posta*
*sopra l'alto arco della porta, e vedi*
*come 'l suo dar val poco e molto costa".*
*Ed io allora a riguardar mi diedi*
*la scritta in alto che pareva d'oro,*
*tenendo ancora in là voltati i piedi.*

And if you don't believe that this narrow path
leads to salvation, raise your head.
See what the carved letters say:
Then I lifted up my face, and saw: "This
small door leads to the way of life;
even if it seems hard to climb
this climb gives eternal rest;
so go up without being slow,
the soul overcomes the lazy flesh".
[...]
"[...] Put your intellect to the inscription that is
placed above the high arch of the door, and see
how its giving is worth little and costs a lot".
And I then looked at
the inscription above that seemed golden,
keeping my feet turned away.

**32** On this subject, see also Malato 1970, s. v.

**33** On real inscriptions inspired by Dante's model, see Claudio Ciociola 1992.

| | |
|---|---|
| *"Ricchezze, dignità, ogni tesoro,* | "Wealth, dignity, every treasure, |
| *gloria mondana copiosamente* | worldly glory |
| *do a color che passan nel mio coro.* | I give to those who pass through my choir. |
| *Lieti li fo nel mondo, e similmente* | I make them happy in the world, and similarly |
| *do quella gioia che Amor promette* | I give that joy that Love promises |
| *a' cor che senton suo dardo pugnente".* | to the hearts that feel his sharp arrow". |
| (III, 10–21, 19) | |

Both inscriptions, which are an example of the ekphrastical tension that runs through the *Amorosa visione*, reverse Dante's model,[34] but also incorporate a gospel message (Matthew 7:13–14), variously reformulated in the Middle Ages in judgments and proverbs.[35]

At the conclusion of the discussion of inscriptions in literary texts we must note that we have not considered all the works, especially in verse, that were made to supplement frescoes or pictorial cycles. Thanks to the studies of Claudio Ciociola, Lucia Battaglia Ricci and Furio Brugnolo, who speaks of a poetry for painting, we know that many poets worked as authors of pictorial captions.[36] This is the case for Franco Sacchetti, who in the autograph book of rhymes (Florence, Laurentian Library, Ashburnham 574) recorded his epigraphic production by putting *titoletti* in the margins in order to combine the text with the image for which it was written.[37] Giovanni Boccaccio (author of the epitaph for Pino and Ciampi della Tosa) and Francesco Petrarca (author of the epitaph for the grandson of Francesco da Brossano) also transmitted their inscriptions in this fashion. This phenomenon goes beyond the issue of narrated inscriptions and demonstrates the mutual relations and influences between literary text, images and epigraphic practice.

## 3 Historiography and Travel Narrative

A recent study by Paolo D'Achille highlights the many points of convergence between chronicles and *scritture esposte*, evident not only in the shared desire to commemorate, but also in common stylistic features such as spatial and temporal deictics, certain types of constructions (sub-clauses introduced by *when* and *how*), and the use of bilingualism.[38] Besides recalling cases of inscription-chronicles (real inscriptions

**34** See Picone 2002.

**35** *Intrate per angustam portam, quia lata porta et spatiosa via, quae ducit ad perditionem, et multi sunt, qui intrant per eam; quam angusta porta et arta via, quae ducit ad vitam, et pauci sunt, qui inveniunt eam!*

**36** See Claudio Ciociola 1992; Brugnolo 1992, 305–339 and Ricci 1994.

**37** Ricci 1997, 438f.

**38** See Paolo D'Achille 2017, 346–372.

containing chronicle information), D'Achille pays special attention to *scritture esposte* in the vernacular chronicles.

From the thirteenth century onwards, a new type of urban chronicle developed in Italy that abandoned the annalistic approach of earlier compilations in favour of pursuing an argument. In this new production the space of the city and its description becomes more important and the inscriptions become objects to remember, as "fossilized voices" that recall the memory of past things. Some of these medieval chronicles enter the literary canon, such as the *Cronica delle cose occorrenti ai tempi suoi* by Dino Compagni (c. 1310), a chronicle with a universal setting by Giovanni Villani (and the continuation by Matteo and Filippo Villani), and the *Cronica* of an anonymous Roman (1357–1360).[39]

This *Cronica*, which tells the story of the Roman Republic from 1325 to 1357, records some inscriptions that otherwise would never have come down to us. In chapter XVIII the anonymous author describes the allegorical paintings commissioned by the Roman tribune Cola di Rienzo in the Capitol building. This cycle of frescoes depicted the miserable state besetting Rome.[40] The city is personified as a widow on a boat adrift in a stormy sea agitated by the breath of animals symbolising the different orders of the Roman population; Italy, the Christian faith and the Virtues mourn the sad fate of Rome. The Anonymous Roman also records the *tituli*, i. e. the captions that accompanied and reveal the allegorical correspondences:

| | |
|---|---|
| *"Questa ène Roma".* | "That's Rome". |
| *"Queste citati per la iniustizia pericolaro e vennero meno".* | "These cities for injustice were destroyed". |
| *"Sopra onne signoria fosti in aitura.* | "Above every lordship you were at height, now |
| *Ora aspettamo qui la toa rottura".* | we wait here for your destruction". |
| *"Questa ène Italia".* | "This is Italy". |
| [...] | [...] |
| *"D'onne virtute fosti accompagnata.* | "You had many virtues. |
| *Ora per mare vai abannonata".* | Now you are alone and abandoned at sea". |
| *"O summo patre, duca e signor mio,* | "O great Father, |
| *se Roma pere, dove starraio io?".* | if Rome dies, what will I do?" |
| *"Questi so' li potienti baroni,* [...]". | "These are the mighty lords, [...]". |
| (XVIII, 145–147) | |

The chronicler also recalls the fresco in Sant'Angelo in Pescheria, again commissioned by Cola, which instead depicts the salvation of Rome, of course embodied by the tribune itself. In fact, Cola di Rienzo is portrayed as an angel, invoked by the patrons to liberate Rome. Again, the Anonymous Roman relays the captions in full:

**39** For an overview of medieval chronicles in Italy, see Porta 1995, 159–210; Gualdo 2013, 5–29 and the contributions collected in Francesconi/Miglio 2017.

**40** On this type of political art, see Donato 1992, 341–396.

| | |
|---|---|
| *"Agnilo, agnilo, succurri alla albergatrice nostra".* | "Angel, Angel, help our city". |
| *"Veo lo tiempo della granne iustizia e là taci fi' allo tiempo".* | "I see the time of great justice and you keep quiet until that time". |

(XVIII, 151)

The testimony of the Anonymous Roman is important for many reasons. First, it allows us to reconstruct the content and significance of the frescoes and trace the modes of political propaganda. It also documents the technical terminology used in medieval times to refer to the *scritture esposte*. Thus, we find *tituli*, *letters* and *vierzo* ("verses") used as terms for captions. But beyond its historical value, the description offered by the Anonymous Roman also plays a role in the plot: through the inscriptions the Anonymous Roman not only recalls an important object for the city's memory, but enhances Cola's political capacity and the effectiveness of his political communication.

Inscriptions in chronicles are not always written in the vernacular. Villani, a Tuscan chronicler, for example, describes an inscription in Latin:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Si probitas, sensus, virtutum gratia, census,* | If honesty, intelligence, the highest virtues, wisdom, good reputation |
| *Nobilitas orti possint resistere morti,* | and the nobility of blood could resist death, |
| *Non foret extintus Federicus qui iacet intus* | Federico, who rests here, would not have died. |

(VII, 41, 332)

The memory of the inscription is linked to the urban environment. Villani, describing the construction of the Baptistery S. Giovanni in Florence, also recalls the astronomical inscription in medieval Latin that appears under the sun mosaic (or "story *a moises*", as Villani calls it on the basis of a folk etymology). Probably the writing was so popular with the locals that Villani felt the need to clarify its origin and function:

> *e a' nostri tempi si compié il lavorio delle storie a moises dipinte dentro. E troviamo per antiche ricordanze che la figura del sole intagliata nello ismalto, che dice: "En giro torte sol ciclos, et rotor igne", fu fatta per astronomia.* (II, 23, 90)
>
> and in our day the work of the mosaics was finished. And we find in ancient recollections that the figure of the sun carved in the enamel, which says: *En giro torte sol ciclos, et rotor igne*, it was made for astronomy.

The inscription (called the *rotor*) is still visible today: it is a palindromic phrase stating "[I], the sun, with fire make turn the circles and I turn as well". Villani explains the meridian function of the mosaic, which in its day was probably lost when the work was moved from its original place and ceased to function as an astronomical clock.

Chronicles in the vernacular also record simpler inscriptions of a lower register, such as defamatory paintings, of which statutes also speak. The *Cronaca todina* by Ioan Fabrizio Degli Atti states how

| | |
|---|---|
| *lo decto meser Ricardo fo dipencto im piaza et a le porte, per traditore, cum uno breve che diceva:* | Ricardo was painted in the square and on the doors as a traitor with a writing that said: |
| *"Io so Ricardo Spadatracta:* | "I am Ricardo Spadatracta: |
| *el tradimento ordinai et non venne facta".* (108) | I ordered the betrayal and it was not done". |

The practice of painting a picture of the condemned accompanied by a scroll or defamatory caption is also recorded in a Sienese chronicle published by Franco Suitner:[41]

| | |
|---|---|
| *"Voi che legete andate a questi brevi,* | You who read, read this writing and know that |
| *legete el mio e fiavi manifesto,* | to do more harm to my town, I overturned its de- |
| *che per dare più molesto* | cision. |
| *al mio comuno per più tradimento* | |
| *voltai la via del suo intendimento".* | |
| *"Voi che guardate queste dipenture* | You who look at these paintings look at me, who |
| *mirate me, che per la mia avaritia* | have betrayed with great injustice my country for |
| *tradii con gran niquizia* | my avarice; to have money, I sold Siena to the |
| *la patria mia, per avere fiorini* | malicious Florentines. |
| *Siena vendei a' falsi Fiorentini"* | |
| *"Crudel rubaldo cavalier superbo,* | Cruel and rebellious knight, deprived of my lin- |
| *privato di mia schiatta e d'ogni onore,* | eage and all honour, ungrateful to my country |
| *ingrato alla mia patria e traditore,* | and traitor, I stand among them. |
| *fra costor pendo iniquo ed acerbo".* | |

In all examples, the figure expresses itself in the first person, using verses from a rather popular register, consisting of a hendecasyllable and two couplets metrically dissimilar. These inscriptions are about making visible short confessions expressed in the past tense, and sometimes concluded with the accused recognising that his sentence is just. In some cases, the exordium resembles the typical address to the traveller in funerary epitaphs.

Like historiography, the medieval travel literature claims authenticity as an eye witness account. In this type of text we find inscriptions whose function may be to identify a place, or to report on the customs and traditions of a particular people. The first function is important in the passage below, taken from the *Libro d'Oltramare* by Nicholas Poggibonsi (1346–1350), a sort of itinerary through the Holy Land, which cites two inscriptions. The first concerns the tabernacle of the chapel of Christ's tomb in Jerusalem, to which a Latin inscription in gold letters is attached:

**41** Suitner 1983.

| | |
|---|---|
| *e in ciascuno canto del civorio si è uno verso, e è sì alto che apena si può leggere; e li versi dicono così:* | And on each side of the ciborium is a verse, and it is so high that it is barely readable; and the verses say so: |
| [*v*]*ita mori voluit et in hoc tumulo requievit* | Life wished to die and lay in this tomb |
| *Mors quia vita fuit nostram victrix abolevit.* | because death was turned into life, conquering life has destroyed our death. |
| *Nam qui confregit inferna sibique subiecit.* | For he who broke in pieces the infernal regions and subjected them to Himself |
| *Et redimendo suos cujus dux ipse choortis* | by ransoming his people the Leader himself of the company |
| *Adque triunfator bine surrexit leo foras* | and Vanquisher arose from this place as a lion from its cage. |
| *Tartarus inde gemit Mors lugens spoliatur.* (18, 60) | Wherefore hell cries out and lamenting death is robbed. |

The second inscription reported by Niccolò of Poggibonsi concerns the tomb of Elijah on Mount Carmel and the chapel erected on Mount Tabor in memory of the transfiguration of Christ. Both of these are commemorative inscriptions:

> *E ivi il nostro Signore Gesù Cristo, volendo mostrare la gloria sua agli apostoli, ivi dov'è la tomba, sì si trasfigurò e apparve subito Moisè e Elia, e parlavano con lui; e la voce fu udita da cielo, e così si è scritto di lettere d'oro su nella detta tomba, e dicono così: "Hic est filius meus dilectus, in quo mihi bene complacui, ipsum audite". Et in terra si sono le forme, come sbigotito santo Pietro, e santo Giovanni, e santo Iacobo caddono in terra, per lo grande splendore; e dove santo Pietro cadde, sì v'è scritto così: "Domine, bonum est nobis hic esse, etc". La chiesa si è quasi guasta, se non se la tomba*. (CXXV, 1345)

> And here our Lord Jesus Christ, wanting to show his glory to the apostles, was transfigured, and Moses and Elijah appeared immediately, and spoke with him; and the voice was heard from heaven, and so letters of gold were written in the tomb, and so they say: *Hic est filius meus dilectus, in quo mihi bene complacui, ipsum audite*. And on the ground there are the forms of the bodies of St Peter, St John, and St James, who fell faint to the ground, for the great splendour; and where St Peter fell, it is written as follows: *Domine, bonum est nobis hic esse,* etc. The church almost broke down, except for the grave.

In the *Milione*, Marco Polo instead records the inscription on the tablets given by the Grand Khan to his subjects word for word:

> *E in tutte queste tavole è scritto uno comandamento, e dice così: "Per la forza del grande dio e de la grande grazia ch'à donata al nostro imperadore, lo nome del Grande Kane sia benedetto, e tutti quegli che no ubideranno siano morti e distrutti"*. (LXXX, 9, 122)

> A commandment is written in these tablets: "By the power of the great God and of the great grace which he has given to our emperor, may the name of the Great Khan be blessed, and that whoever shall not obey him be killed and destroyed".

The tablets and the command described by the Venetian are *paiza*, tablets of metal or wood that the Mongols carried hanging from their necks and that could also be used as passports. Marco Polo's attention to this object reveals his interest in the political and commercial system of Asian countries, an interest shared by his readers.

## 4 The Religious and Hagiographic Discourse

Saints' lives are among one of the first genres written in the vernacular. Aimed at a broad and diverse audience, these texts transpose and spread topoi and motifs originating with the first Christian communities in the East. Hagiography also gives rise to different narrative genres (legends in prose and verse, sacred representations, translations, miracles, etc.)[42] and continuously influences secular literature. One of the most widely disseminated collections was the *Legenda aurea* (Golden Legend, 1298) by the Dominican Jacopo da Varazze (Latin: Voragine), soon translated into the vernacular in the fourteenth century. Hagiographic literature was spread and multiplied by preachers, who drew on *exempla* and narrative ideas, but also circulated doctrinal and theological content.

In the lives of saints and in religious literature many types of inscriptions appear, some of which have already been examined in the preceding sections. Very present are of course epitaphs, which evoke mixed reactions. While one exemplum in the *Disciplina clericalis* praises the didactic function of the tomb inscriptions, Bernardino of Siena in one of his sermons (*Prediche volgari sul campo di Siena 1427*, X, 3) advises against the practice of affixing signs and inscriptions onto graves and tells of a man who replaces the *a* in *pace* in the phrase *Requiescat in pace* with an *e*, so that it reads *Requiescat in pece*, i. e. "may he rest in hell".

Beyond stone epitaphs, religious literature confronts us with inscriptions in a variety of other media: the sacred word is not only fixed on stone or metal, but manages to impress itself on very different materials. Moreover, even the Holy Scripture alludes to very different acts of writing: the commandments engraved on the tablets of the law, the divine hand writing a phrase on the wall of a palace, Jesus writing in the sand (John 8:6–8) before erasing the traces with his finger.[43]

I begin by cycling through epiphanic inscriptions, manifestations of the divine. An inscription on the heart of the saint or devotee is an important topos. As Polo de

**42** On vernacular hagiography in the Middle Ages, see the contributions collected in De Roberto/Wilhelm, 2016, esp. the introduction to the volume (De Roberto 2016, 1–19). See also the studies in Albonico/Bock 2017.

**43** For a discussion of the tablets of law see Ricarda Wagner's chapter on tablets in this volume. For a discussion of the epiphanic writing at Belshazzar's Feast see Christine Neufeld's chapter on architectural inscriptions in this volume.

Beaulieu has shown, it originates from the legend of Ignatius of Antioch, becomes widespread in the Middle Ages thanks to the *Speculum historiale* (thirteenth century) by Vincent of Beauvais and the *Legenda aurea*, but also appears in the *Espositione del simbolo* (fourteenth century) by Domenico Cavalca.[44] As the early martyrologies record, Ignatius repeatedly uttered the name of Christ, so that after his death they found the name of Jesus written in his heart in golden letters.[45] With this precedent, the inscription on the heart becomes a symbol of holiness and gives rise to variations on the theme. In collections of exempla and miracles, the marvel is transposed onto simple devotees who demonstrated that they held the name of Jesus in high esteem. A sermon of 1425 by Bernardino of Siena refers to an inscription on the heart to a dead pilgrim on Calvary. This is interesting because it shows how precisely the topos of the inscription on the heart was instrumental in the Dominican discourse for the promotion of the cult of the name of Jesus and the trigram JHS. The material and the wording of the inscription also diversified.

In the *Legenda aurea* and its translation into the Italian vernacular, the chapter on the Annunciation tells the story of a humble monk of feeble intelligence who did nothing but repeat "Ave Maria". After his death a lily grows on his grave, on whose leaves appears the inscription *Ave Maria* in letters of gold:

> *eccoti sopra l'avello suo crescere uno bello giglio e in catuna foglia avea scritto di lettere d'oro: "Ave Maria". Correndo tutti a sì grande fatto vedere, trassero la terra del sepolcro, e la radice del giglio trovarono che procedeva de la bocca del morto*. (L, 437)
>
> A beautiful lily grew up above his grave, and one leaf had the words "Ave Maria". All rushed to see, and found that the root of the lily was born from the mouth of the dead.

The same narrative nucleus reoccurs in the rhymes of Bonvesin da la Riva, a Milanese poet of the thirteenth century, both in the *Cinquanta miracoli* and in the *Libro del cavaliere*.[46]

It is likely that the inscription on the heart is the basis for secular motifs such as the topos of the face of the beloved engraved in the poet's heart (see § 2). In a poem by Matteo Frescobaldi, the ardour of Love incises "Francescha" into the heart of the poet:

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**44** Polo de Beaulieu 1991, 297–312 and Polo de Beaulieu 2000, 217–326.

**45** For another discussion of the saint and this topos see Stephanie Béreiziat-Lang's and Michael R. Ott's chapter on inscriptions on body and skin in this volume.

**46** See also De Roberto 2018, 177–189. On medieval miraculous literature in the vernacular, see De Roberto 2019.

*Con tre saette Amor nel cor mi venne,*
*credendo sostenerlo non potesse,*
*coll'aste nere e poi scritto in esse*
*lettere d'oro che parien le penne.*
*La prima avea un'EFFE R A e ENNE,*
*poi la seconda C E e ESSE,*
*la terza C H A parea ch'avesse,*
*secondo che lla mente ne ritenne.*
(9, 79)

With three arrows with black rods Amor came
into my heart believing I could not bear it,
and in the arrows were
golden letters that looked like pens.
The first had an EFFE R A and ENNE,
then the second C E and ESSE,
the third C H A
as far as I can remember.

The body is a very frequent writing material in hagiographical literature, which also alludes to specific ritual gestures, like the sign of the cross that the faithful draw by hand on their foreheads, lips and heart, just before the reading of the Gospel. The forehead in particular is a part of the body that has a high symbolic value: a mark on the forehead is in fact the singular sign of belonging to God or to the devil. Such inscriptions often contain hidden allusions to liturgy, as we see in the seven *P*s the angel draws on Dante's forehead in the ninth canto of *Purgatorio*.[47]

Epiphanic writings in the hagiographic narratives also intervene at the time of the saint's martyrdom: a choir of angels descends to earth to convey a divine message inscribed on a scroll, a painting or a board. The inscription, which may be quoted or reported less directly, certifies the sanctity of the martyr, as happens in two subsequent passages from the *Leggenda di s. Rocco* in ottave (fifteenth century) and one of the many legends in prose of Saint Agata, *La lienda de Sancta Agata virgine*:[48]

*E a' soy pedi fo posto uno quadreto*
*de la gratia ch' elo aveva domandata,*
*e scripto 'li era tuto a letre d' oro*
*che confermato l' è nel suo coro.*
(124, 987–990)

And at his feet was placed a small plaque
of the grace he had asked for
and there is written in gold letters
that which is confirmed in his heart.

*cento zuveni billissimi ornati e tuti vestiti de biancho, li quali may non erano veduti in quello payso, e vene dove era lo corpo de sancta Agata, e li poxe una tavorela de marmoro al capo, dove era scripto queste parole: "Mentem sanctam, spontaneam, honorem Deo et patrie liberationem".* (107)

A hundred beautiful young people dressed in white and adorned came where the saint Agata was and placed a marble tablet on her head, where it was written: *Mentem sanctam, spontaneam, honorem Deo et patrie liberationem*.

The inscription of St Agata spreads from the first vitae of the saint and is an element already present in the Eastern tradition. Additionally, the source we have quoted

**47** For an in depth discussion of this episode see Stephanie Béreiziat-Lang's and Michael R. Ott's chapter on inscriptions on body and skin in this volume.
**48** Both quotations are taken from Lombard texts edited in Wilhelm/De Roberto 2019.

subsequently adds a detail of daily life: *La lienda de Sancta Agata virgine* describes the custom, apparently common in fifteenth-century Milan, to distribute sandwiches (*michete*) inscribed with the phrase in question:

> *E queste sono le sancte parole che se scriveno sopra le michete che funo dato via per li canonici de Sancto Nazaro lo dì de sancta Agata, che hano vertù contra lo focho che faza dagno, in ulgare dice cossì: "Questa vergene ha hauto la mente sancta, e spontaneamente s' è offerta al martirio a honore de Dio e a liberatione de la patria".* (109f.)
>
> And these are the holy words that are written on the breads that the monks of San Nazzaro give in the street on the day of Santa Agata. These words are useful against fire. In the vernacular they mean: "This virgin had the holy mind, and spontaneously offered herself to martyrdom in honour of God and for the liberation of the country".

The reference is to *Agathe*-Brot, a widespread tradition especially in Northern Italy, Austria and Switzerland and linked to the cult of the saint, believed to be able to protect against fire and lightning. The inscription of "Agata" was also often engraved inside bells, which in the Middle Ages had the important task of serving as fire alarms. Such examples demonstrate how the inscriptions narrated in hagiographic literature carry out two functions simultaneously: on the one hand they play a role in the story of the events involving the saint; on the other hand, they contribute to motivating and establishing the cult of the saint and give rise to ritual practices and long-standing customs.

## 5 The Magical Discourse: Recipe Books

Many medieval writing practices, such as the ones I have just discussed, lie at the heart of an interconnected field between religion, superstition and medical discourses. The practice of carrying various types of inscriptions (on fabric, on metal or stone, or wrapped in a magic scroll) on the body is often condemned in didactic religious treatises. Nevertheless, these formulas, used across a Europe, were deemed capable of protecting one from various dangers. Not surprisingly, they tended to be in Latin, the language of Christian rites, which to the "illitterati" must have had an esoteric aura.

More precise information on this type of inscription comes from recipe books or books of secrets, mostly vernacular translations of the *Thesaurum pauperum* by Pietro Ispano (thirteenth century), but also from some collections of recipes handed down orally. In the Sicilian vernacular, for example, we find a long interpolated sequence that contains some thaumaturgical inscriptions:[49]

**49** Here and below I use + to indicate the sign of the cross.

*A febri terzana*
*Pigla tri puma et scrivi cum incastro, innanczi ki li vengna la febri "+Jhs alga + Jhus galla +Jhuslaga amen". Et factu quistu, dandu a maniari omni iornu unu la mattina a lu infirmu et serrà guaritu.* (87, 64).

Against tertian fever
Take three feathers and write on them with ink, before the fever comes, "+Jhs alga + Jhus galla +Jhuslaga amen". And done this, every day in the morning give the feathers to eat to the sick and he will be cured.

This remedy for ague fever consists in taking three apples and inscribing their top with the cross, the trigram and the two words *alga* and *galla* in ink, perhaps corruptions of the magic word *agla* (from Hebrew). The passage is significant because it also bears witness to a graphophagical practice: the inscriptions are eaten along with the fruits (the same is true of *Agathe*-Brot).

Magical inscriptions may also be written on the patient's body:

*A rristringiri lu sangu di lu nasu*
*Scrivi cum lu dictu sangui in lu frunti, si illu è homu: "+beretonis oyberoniso"; si è fimmina: "+ britonissa oy bironissa".* (89, 65).

To stop the nose bleed
Write with that blood on the person's forehead, if he is a man: "+beretonis oyberoniso"; if she is a woman: "+ britonissa oy bironissa".

Magical "experiments" do not differ greatly from this. They sometimes involve writing short sentences, words or symbols. Typically, these inscriptions are to be drawn on paper, papyrus or the patient's skin; but there are cases where the material is more imaginative. Several spells in the book of magic in MS Italian 1524 (French National Library), for instance, require a tin or wax writing surface:[50]

*Se voi havere alchuna femina* [...] *formarai l'imagine di stagnio in nome di quella persona la qual tu desidri havere* [...] *Poi scrive in quella imagine queste parole in gramatica, cioè: omnis homo, et fagli anchora sopra i sigilli di Venere e dil Leone.* (37, 234)

If you want to have a woman [...] you will form the image of tin in the name of the person you wish to have [...] Then write these words in Latin in that image: *omnis homo*, and write again the symbols of Venus and Leo.

**50** The following three excerpts are all taken from Gal/Boudet/Moulinier Broggi 2017. The codex collects many medical recipes as well as magic and astronomical treatises. About Latin and Romance magical inscriptions see also Barbato 2019.

The same commandment is repeated twice, with the only difference being the zodiac signs involved:

> *Volendo haver alchuna femina, in l'hora di Giove, scrive con grafio di ferro il nome di quella amante e dilla sua matre in lammia di ferro, e le carattere di Venere e Sagitario e d'Ariete* [...] *Poi scalda questa lammia spesse fiate al fuocho.* (41, 235)
>
> if you want any woman, write with an iron tool her name and her mother's name on an iron or glass sheet. Write also the symbol of Venus, Sagittarius and Aries. [...] Then heat this foil up often by fire.

These artefacts recall the *tabulae defixionis* used in the Greco-Roman world. The principle is the same: the analogy between image/inscription and real referents makes what you write on wax or metal materialise in reality. Other experiments require the writing of symbols and unknown characters with oil. At the end the inscription must be deleted with the finger and the oil must be applied to the face:

> *Volendo andar avanti a qualche gran signore o prencipe, scrive tutto questo psalmo: Confiteor tibi, Domine in lammia di vitro o di ferro con le carratteri infrascritte, et poi guastale con olio rosato, et di quello olio la tua faccia unge, et serai ben receputo.* (248)
>
> If you want to go to some great lord or prince, write the entire psalm: *Confiteor tibi, Domine* in a sheet of glass or iron with the following symbols. Then destroy the inscription with oil of rose, grease your face with that oil and you will be received well.

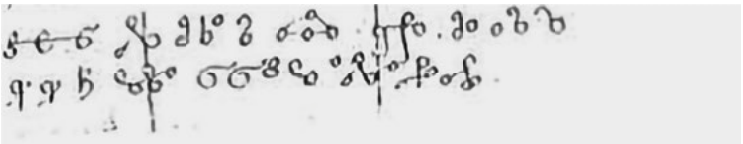

**Fig. 4:** Cryptic symbols to be inscribed following a magical instruction taken from Gal/Boudet/Moulinier Broggi 2017, 248 (= French National Library, MS Italian 1524).

In other cases, spells require different materials, bones, fruit, body parts; instead of ink or an incision, people may use blood. It is not always necessary to strictly follow the indications: in some cases a particular medium can be replaced by paper or parchment.

These practices, apart from being very widespread, also gave rise to various businesses by charlatans. The novella of the fourteenth century does not fail to take up this phenomenon and turns it into a mechanism of comedy. In one of the short stories from Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, a magic scroll is the key feature of the narrative: the fool Calandrino falls in love with a woman and the charlatan Bruno makes him believe that he can bind her to him by crafting a magic scroll which will then lead

to contact with the desired woman. To this end, Calandrino will have to procure a number of ingredients:

> *"Adunque, – disse Bruno – fa che tu mi rechi un poco di carta non nata e un vispistrello vivo e tre granella d'incenso e una candela benedetta, e lascia far me". Calandrino stette tutta la sera vegnente con suoi artifici per pigliare un vispistrello, e alla fine presolo, con l'altre cose il portò a Bruno. Il quale, tiratosi in una camera, scrisse in su quella carta certe sue frasche con alquante cateratte, e portogliele*. (IX, V, 47–48, 1422)

> "Fetch me, then", quoth Bruno, "a bit of the skin of an unborn lamb, a live bat, three grains of incense, and a blessed candle; and leave the rest to me". To catch the bat taxed all Calandrino's art and craft for the whole of the evening; but having at length taken him, he brought him with the other matters to Bruno: who, having withdrawn into a room by himself, wrote on the skin some cabalistic jargon, and handed it to him.

Obviously, the scroll is only a means to fool Calandrino. It is noteworthy that similar ingredients are also cited by Cecco d'Ascoli in the poem *L'Acerba*, which polemicises against witchcraft: *L'immagin dello stagno e della cira, / E vespertilio con scritta di sangue / Che con lo spago legato si tira* ("The image of the pond and the wax, / And bat with the inscription of blood / Which tied with string is pulled").

The topic of the magic scroll is taken up by Franco Sacchetti in his *Trecentonovelle*. An impostor sells a magic scroll for five guilders to a woman who is afraid of dying in childbirth. The magic scroll seemingly fulfils its effect and many other women decide to purchase it. After a few years the first woman and her friends are curious to know what is written on the inside and open it (to maintain their effectiveness magic scrolls needed to remain closed):

> *e trovata la scritta in carta sottilissima di cavretto, lessono il detto brieve, il cui tenore dicea cosí: "Gallina, gallinaccia, Un orciuolo di vino e una cofaccia, Per la mia gola caccia, S'ella il può fare, sí 'l faccia, E se non sí, si giaccia"*. (CCVII, 565)

> And when they found the inscription in very thin paper of a kid, they read the letter, which said: "Hen, hen, a jug of wine and a cake, push it down my throat, if you can, do it, and if you don't, lie down".

Although this is an example of writing on parchment and not strictly speaking an inscription, its similarity to the magical practices in the *Decameron* offers a comical take on the reputed powers of text-bearing artefacts. The inscription parodies the typical trend of these protection formulas, replacing rare and solemn words with the vocabulary of the most trivial everyday language (*gallina*, *cofaccia* or "focaccia"). The rhyme also contains an obscene pun on which the humour of the entire story is based. The novel ends with the exhortation not to yield to easy credulity.

# 6 Conclusions

Studying inscriptions in the context of discursive genres is important for many reasons. Some inscriptions are found especially in certain genres, where they can work as intertextual references and establish a literary topos, such as the lover's epitaph. Depending on the genre in which they appear, inscriptions seem to have different functions. While in the chronicles they are used as sources and therefore as evidence to substantiate the truthfulness of the reported facts, in fictional texts inscriptions can be informative elements that allow the narrative to progress: they can become a convenient way to introduce details or new information into the text. Often inscriptions are quotations that refer to a literary or biblical topos. The inscriptions in the *Commedia,* for example, build a dense network of intertextual references to Virgil's *Aeneid* and more generally to classical tradition. Some inscriptions, epiphanic ones, for instance, exist only within the discursive framework that legitimises them. This proves the importance of studying these textual objects.

The question of materiality deserves a final comment. Sometimes the material is not so important: in the *Thesaurum pauperum* or in the magical discourse materials are often interchangeable; in fact, a spell can be written either on iron or on glass. It would be interesting to understand which cases offer such a freedom of choice. In any case, regardless of function, genre, material or support, the narrated inscriptions in the Italian corpus show an affinity for those simple and short genres (motto, epitaph, etc.) that exert a particular fascination in the literature of all times. Most of the cases discussed in the previous pages are epigraphic inscriptions: stone and marble are the materials most commonly represented in the narrated inscriptions. Certainly, in the Italian Middle Ages epigraphy had an important public and political function.[51] It is one of the main means by which the city authorities could communicate with the people. The prominence that epigraphs engraved in stone and marble enjoy in medieval texts may have other reasons. In fact, we must not forget the prestige of the Latin epigraphic tradition, nor underestimate the symbolic meaning linked to writing in stone, the epitome of the word that lasts over time and therefore the epitome of writing itself. In this sense, it is possible to see an analogy between the text engraved on stone and the monumental value of the literary text.

**51** See Giove Marchioli 1994, 263–286.

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