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Writing Spaces: Inscriptions on Architecture

When it comes to inscriptions in medieval literature there is likely no example more famous than the gate to Hell in the *Inferno* of Dante's *Divina Commedia*. The anaphoric intonations of the tercet beginning Canto 3 summon Dante's hellish vision even for the popular imagination, making the inscription a synecdoche for the poem itself.

Per me si va ne la città dolente, *per me si va ne l'etterno dolore,* *per me si va tra la perduta gente.*	Through me the way into the suffering city, Through me the way to the eternal pain, Through me the way that runs among the lost,
Giustizia mosse il mio alto fattore; *fecemi la divina podestate,* *la somma sapïenza e 'l primo amore.*	Justice urged on my high Artificer; My maker was divine Authority, The highest Wisdom, and the primal Love.
Dinanzi a me non fuor cose create *se non etterne, e io etterno duro.* *Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'entrate.* (III.1–9)	Before me nothing but eternal things Were made, and I endure eternally. Abandon every hope, who enter here.

The familiarity of this inscription obscures to some extent the fact that the inscribed gate actually represents "an interpretive impediment" for the pilgrim Dante.[1]

Queste parole di colore oscuro *vid' ïo scritte al sommo d'una porta;* *per ch'io: "Maestro, il senso lor m'è duro".* (III.10–12)	These words—their aspect was obscure—I read inscribed above a gateway, and I said: "Master, their meaning is difficult for me".

The interpretive challenge posed by the inscription has given scholars pause as well.[2] As Freccero observes, "[t]he uncertainty of the commentators about whether the dark color is a physical description or a characterisation of the meaning of the phrase, its *rhetorical* color, suggests that they cannot decide whether the pilgrim is *seeing* or *reading* the inscription."[3] Scholars alert to medieval hermeneutics have engaged rhetorical models to explain the challenge posed by the text—referencing, for example, the disciples' incomprehension in John 6:61 ("This saying is hard, and who can hear it?") or Augustine's discussion in *De Genesi ad Litteram* of the uncomprehending

1 Freccero 1984, 776.

2 For a summary of how fourteenth-century commentaries on Dante grappled with the gate's inscription see Pinti 2000, 311–340.

3 Freccero 1984, 775.

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https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110645446-012

reader in terms of the Book of Daniel's mysterious writing on the wall.[4] Attending to the materiality of the sign, the physical "darkness" and "hardness" that reinforce the psychological burden or hermeneutic labour the inscription implies, however, draws attention to the fact that how we envision the structure bearing the inscription can also inform how we read this passage. The impression that we are encountering a direct citation of the inscription in Dante's poem can blur the distinctions between monumental epigraph and codex for readers. Nevertheless, visualising the object that bears this text begins to flesh out significant distinctions in these material textual cultures. Encountering the inscriptions of a semantically-charged built world in the Middle Ages means what we see can determine what we read.

As an architectural structure, Hell's gate has been imagined as a Roman triumphal arch and a medieval city gate; its inscription has been related to funereal epitaphs, as well as to the portal inscriptions found on Romanesque churches.[5] These monumental, civic, funereal and ecclesiatical iterations manifest how architecture will be defined in this chapter broadly as locostatic edifaces designed for human use.[6] We tend to imagine inscribed edifaces as very stable in that they are produced in materials that are typically fixed and durable, and are designed as public texts to communicate effectively to many people, often repeatedly and over long periods of time.[7] Taking into consideration work by scholars of 'the spatial turn', however, reveals that despite their immobility inscribed architectural artefacts can be profoundly dynamic. Linda Safran explains, "[m]eaning in medieval public spaces was communicated by the combination of a spatial and decorative system, images, and texts, and as such the reception of textual messages was affected by their physical and decorative context".[8] Moreover, inscriptions in architecture teach us that space is more than a container or material/geographical territory by drawing attention to "spatial practices". For "space" is also generated by movement, usage and narratives (civic, historical, mythic) and organises not only physical matter but society itself. Inscriptions can play important roles in spatial practices, by, for example, establishing a space as local or global, creating borders and passages, or administering belonging and exclusion.

4 See Freccero 1984, as well as Frongia 1998. All citations from the Bible in this article will be drawn from the Douay Rheims Bible, http://www.drbo.org/index.htm (last accessed: 30.05.2019).

5 For a list of the different architectural structures referenced in Dante commentary see Frongia 1998. On the affinity between Dante's gate and Romenesque portal inscriptions see Kendall 1993.

6 See OED definition, "architecture, n." in: *OED Online*, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/10408?rskey=su4fkG&result=1&isAdvanced=false (last accessed: 30.05.2019). Since the prominence of funereal edifaces, such as sepulchres and tombs, in medieval narrative merits its own scholarly study in Laura Velte's chapter on tombs, I will omit them from my consideration here. Similarly, portable items such as tents, and items that could be considered "furnishings" will not feature in this argument, in order explore the dynamism of locostatic inscriptions. For a discussion of the tent as a unique inscribed artefact cf. Laura Velte's and Michael R. Ott's chapter on German literature and Ludger Lieb's chapter on textiles in this volume.

7 See Safran 2011.

8 Safran 2011, 135.

If we examine Dante's gate the inscribed warning takes on different dimensions depending on the spatial practices imagined by the reader. Robert Hollander draws on the urban landscape of medieval Italy, filled with the architectural vestiges of the Roman Empire, to imagine the inscription as a Christian variation of the victorious verses engraved in Roman triumphal arches.[9] Casting the sinner as a prisoner of war being led back to "that Rome of which Christ is Roman" (*Purg*. XXXII.102), the gate becomes a memorial monument whose assertion orients the viewer eschatologically rather than geographically, even as it draws on the architectural features of a specific locality to characterise Divine Justice. In contrast, envisioning the gate's inscription as a more universally recognisable medieval city gate, as Guido Mazzoni does, focuses the reader's attention on the territorial boundary the pilgrim must now cross, distinguishing the wilderness he has traversed from *la città dolente* (*Inf.* III.1) he is about to enter.[10] Here the gate inscription is a contact point between two materially and rhetorically distinct spaces, the allegorical dark wood and the contrapasso of the infernal city, whose "civic" conditions the pilgrim and the reader must both labour to comprehend.

Even as the gate is a conduit between different spaces, the inscription interrupts and qualifies this movement. As Vincent Debiais observes, "inscriptions in doorways invite the reader to stop; to suspend the movement induced by crossing the doorway. The content of epigraphic texts relies on the [...] broadly symbolic implications of changes in space to transform the suspension of the reader's movement into a dramatic understanding of the precise features of the space he is entering".[11] Thus, Freccero's reading of the gate's inscription as analogous to a funerary epitaph, a material presence that marks a spiritual absence, makes it an icon of the metaphysical condition of spiritual deprivation that confronts the reader in the realm beyond.[12] The inscription's role in producing a dramatic understanding is also clear in Calvin Kendall's reading of Dante's inscription as a demonic inversion of the portal inscriptions found in Romanesque church portals which addressed the Christian about to enter in the voice of Christ or the Church: "Each detail—the voice in the first person, the repeated phrase *per me*, the use of the imperative in the last line, the verb *intrate*—shows us how thoroughly Dante had absorbed the convention. This is the voice of hell".[13] Kendall's argument that such portal inscriptions are performative utterances that not only inform but transform the receptive worshipper draws attention to inscription's contribution to the dynamism of space as a network of affordant materials, practices and imaginings that is continually being negotiated. The inscription in an architecture can be an icon or a voice, a boundary marker or agent of transformation;

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9 Hollander 1969. Available through *Dante Lab Reader*.

10 Mazzoni 1941.

11 Debiais 2017, 302.

12 Freccero 1984, 776 f.

13 Kendall 1993, 113.

it orients the viewer in material space, as well as in relation to the past or the future, and thereby shapes identities both individual and communal. The variety of interpretations produced by examining the material context of Dante's famous inscription indicates just how challenging, and how analytically generative, interpreting the inscribed architectural element in medieval literature can be.

A survey of architectural inscriptions in medieval literature reveals that two architectural elements predominate: the monument and the threshold (a gate or doorway). The more detailed analysis that follows in this chapter is organised by several observations based on an overview of the evidence presented in the CRC database and the scholarship in the first half of this volume. First, even as these artefacts are informed by historical developments in medieval architecture and built environments, they are also clearly distinguished by genre. The inscribed monument appears in works with "historical" subjects, in legends of origin or romances set in Greco-Roman antiquity. The inscribed threshold also appears in romances, but is deployed most frequently in genres inclined towards allegory, such as the German Minnereden or Middle English dream visions. Second, while such texts reflect historical developments in material textual cultures, they also draw on an ancient literary tradition of inscribed architecture in Judeo-Christian scripture, as evidenced by medieval versions of the Feast of Belshazzar in the Book of Daniel and visionary works based on the Revelation of St John. Consequently, we will discover that the interpenetration of the material and figurative aspects of architectural inscription that occurs in Dante is representative of a reciprocal relationship between architectural textual culture and book culture in the Middle Ages more generally.

In contrast to the simplistic narrative of the Middle Ages as a progression from orality to textuality that makes writing a feature of modernity, inscribed architecture in medieval literature suggests that writing could be a marker of the past in the medieval imagination. In fact, the tradition of an ancient monument inscribed with a message addressed to future generations is already present in antiquity, as Flavius Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities* (93–94 CE) demonstrates:

> I will only endeavor to narrate the story of the progeny of Seth. [...] These, being all of virtuous character, inhabited the same country without dissension and in prosperity, meeting with no untoward incident to the day of their death; they also discovered the science of the heavenly bodies and their orderly array. Moreover, to prevent their discoveries from being lost to mankind and perishing before they became known—Adam having predicted a destruction of the universe, at one time by a violent fire and at another by a mighty deluge of water—they erected two pillars, one of brick and the other of stone, and inscribed their discoveries on both; so that, if the pillar of brick disappeared in the deluge, that of stone would remain to teach men what was graven thereon and to inform them that they had also erected one of brick. It exists to this day in the land of Sciris. (33)

The "two stelae" of Jewish tradition circulate widely in both the Christian East and the West, appearing in, among other things, Byzantine chronologies (sixth century), the

Greek *Palaea Historia* (ninth century), the Armenian *History of the Forefathers* (seventeenth century) and the Latin *Vita Adae et Evae* (eighth century) that generates the late medieval Apocryphal lives of Adam and Eve.[14] The transformation of the pillars into tablets of stone (or bronze) and clay in the medieval transmission of the legend nevertheless retains the emphasis on a material preservation of knowledge, in some cases (as in the Armenian *Abel* and Latin Adamic legend) even portraying this act of inscription as the invention of writing itself.[15] The materials characterise the monument (and by extension writing) as a tool that allows the past to communicate with the present. Decoding the message embedded in the landscape, furthermore, offers information for the future rather than merely reflecting the past, a theme that remains consistent from the original account of a Sethian transmission of astronomical knowledge to Eve's account of original sin for the benefit of humanity in the Adamic Apocrypha.

Remarkably, inscribed pillars play a similar role in the mythical prehistory of Southern Spain presented in *Estoria de España*, a chronicle written under the supervision of King Alfonso X between 1270 and 1284.[16] The inscriptions of "all knowledge and the nature and function of things" that the legendary Eastern King Rocas transcribes from seventy toppled brass and stone pillars into a codex grant him foreknowledge about the places he visits. In this case these inscriptions also enable him to actively intervene in the future by way of his own inscriptions—his marmorial inscription of "Roma" casts Romulus as an instrument of an imperial destiny already written. The illustrator of the first Alfonsine presentation copy of the *Estoria*, MS Escorial Y.I.2 (c. 1272–1274), employs the same motif in his miniature depicting the civilising hero of ancient Iberia, Hercules. While the literary text does not specify that the marble slab on six stone pillars which the Greek King erects to mark the future site of Seville is inscribed, in the illustration (fol. 5r.) the marble slab bears the inscription: *:AQVI:SERA:POBLADA:LA:GRANT:CIBDAT:* (THE GREAT CITY WILL BE SETTLED HERE).[17] The inscriptional acts ascribed to Rocas and Hercules in King Alfonso's historiographical efforts transform the architectural ruins of past empires on the Iberian Peninsula into prophetic announcements of his own supremacy (as the heir of Hercules and Julius Caesar) over the other Hispanic kingdoms, and thereby also support his international claim to the throne of Holy Roman Emperor.[18]

Alfonso's historiography highlights the political uses of inscription in architecture as a way of organising historical knowledge, which in the Middle Ages primarily meant engaging with the Classical past. Monumental inscriptions typically appear

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14 On the "two stelae" traditions see Adler 1989; Klijn 1977, 24 f., 121–123; Stone 1996, 151, 198; Orlov 2001, 137–158.

15 Orlov 2001, "Overshadowed", n. p. (website).

16 Cf. Stephanie Béreiziat-Lang's discussion of this text in the Iberian literature chapter of this volume. I cite her translation of the *Estoria* passage.

17 See Dias 2004.

18 Porto 2017.

in the context of medieval romances inherited from Greco-Roman sources, such as the legends of Apollonius of Tyre or Alexander the Great, or in tales set in antiquity. In *Apollonius von Tyrland* by Heinrich von Neustadt (early fourteenth century), for instance, the hero receives two honourary columns commemorating his deeds.[19] The first one, a marble pillar with a golden jewel-encrusted statue representing the hero, erected after Apollonius rescues the citizens of Tarsus from a terrible famine and helps them enhance their city, makes explicit its memorial function. The inscription appears as a letter, a *groß brieff* (1224), borne in the statue's right hand; the first person and present tense of the text create the illusion that the viewer is receiving an eyewitness account from the hero himself:[20]

"*Ich kunig Appolonius,*	"I, King Apollonius,
Furste da zu Tyrlant,	Prince of Tyre,
Pey disem pild tuen pekant	With this image proclaim
Das ich die Tarsere	That I the people of Tarsus
Loßt auß grosser schwere	Rescued from great suffering
Mit leibnär und mit speyse.	With nourishment and food.
Da von pin ich zu preyse	Therefore I am, to be honoured,
Her gesatzt, wie es ergie,	Set here, as it happened,
Und pin sein gezeug alhie."	And am right here [as] the witness to it."
(1226–1234)	

Whereas the Old English *Apollonius* (eleventh century) and the *Gesta Romanorum* version (early fourteenth century) follow the Greco-Roman original in focusing iconographically on the hero holding grain in his right hand and grinding it with his left foot (with the inscription on the pedestal), the Viennese doctor Heinrich von Neustadt deploys instead the cultural capital of medieval scribal culture to reinforce the significance of the inscription. The epistle evokes not just the hero's ability to communicate in absentia but quite possibily the legitimating documentary function of the chronicler. Here the inscription is an authenticating device on various levels, a role inscriptions already play in Classical literature.[21] In contrast, the brass column erected for Apollonius in Metelin (Mytilene) recounting in the third person his restoration of the city walls and tower and praising Tarsia (17006–17028) is much less dynamic. In both instances, however, as a benefactor using gold and silver to commission improvements to a city's infrastructure (1179–1188; 16995–17002), the hero's ability to shape

19 Unless otherwise noted or listed in the bibliography, translations are my own. My thanks to Michael R. Ott for his assistance here. For information on inscriptions in the early Greco-Roman versions see Sironen 2003.

20 It is interesting to note that the inscription begins speaking in the voice of the historical figure and ends up speaking in the voice of the statue.

21 See Sironen 2003, 289f. We also see the inscription as authentication device in Alexander romances that deal with his mysterious paternity, as with Nectanabus's inscribed honourary column in the *Alexanderchronik des Meister Babiloth* (early fifteenth century).

history is emblematised by his patronage of building projects that organise and support a particular civic community. The communities' willingness to be shaped by the hero is symbolised by their initiation of inscriptional projects, producing statues that mark themselves as part of a hero's domain.

If such monuments construct Apollonius as a *pater patriae* in the mode of the Roman Emperor, the Alexander romances illustrate precisely how literary narratives understood inscription to serve imperial projects.[22] Already in the earliest version of the romance by Pseudo-Callisthenes, Alexander's imperial ambition is epitomised by his inscription of himself on the landscape. The fifth-century Armenian version of *Alexander* (part of the Alpha MSS group) describes in detail the founding of Alexandria, the centre of the Hellenistic world: "And when he had laid the foundation for most of the city, he wrote upon it the five letters: A, B, C, D, E; A, Alexander; B, the greatest king; C, of the greatest nations; D, in the place of Aramazd; E, descended and built a unique city".[23] Here the inscription coincides with the creation of a space, not only through the foundation of a city but through the outright conquest of territory—a reshaping of geographic and social space as borders and hierarchies shift. The *Alexanderroman* (Wernigerode MS) represents this appropriation of physical space through two honourary columns Alexander erects to commemorate his victories (4440–4462, 4864–4879).

Vil pald hiez er werben	Soon afterwards he gave the order
Daz man mir maister breht,	to get me a masterful craftsman,
Der kunst und wicz bedeht	skillful and prudent,
Vier seul auf richten	to erect four pillars
Und dar ein beslihten	and to write into them
Wie ich die land an der stat	how I have swiftly conquered
Mit meiner hant bezwungen hat.	the realms with my [own] hand.
Daz war als dar ein gegraben	All of that was carved there
Mit puchstaben wol erhaben,	with well embossed letters,
Krichisch, indisch und latein,	Greek, Indian, and Latin,
Ebrayisch sprach da sein	and Hebrew language had to be there,
Müst, dar umb, wer ymmer dar	so that whoever would come past,
Köm, daz er nem war	that he would notice
Wie gar mit freier hant	how thoroughly and sovereignly
Allexander die land	Alexander had brought
Het braht in sein gewalt.	the realms under his command.
(4864–4879)[24]	

22 On Apollonius as *pater patriae* see Ziegler 1984, 222.

23 *The Romance of Alexander the Great by Pseudo-Callisthenes*, 51. The relationship between inscription and foundation is also evident in the legend associating Charlemagne with a monastic alphabet, which appears in his official *vita* composed in Germany sometime after 1165 (his canonisation). The legend claims that Charlemagne founded 23 monasteries, each with a letter of the alphabet inscribed on the lintel to indicate the order in which they had been founded. See Remensnyder 1996.

24 Thanks to Michael R. Ott for the translation into English. The shift from third to first person in

The text's focus on the pillars' multilingual inscriptions highlights that inscription functions here as more than a local memorial. These inscriptions address a global, multicultural set of readers who must acknowledge Alexander's possession of this space and reflect on their own positions within it.

In their frequent replication of Classical epigraphy the *romans antiqs* could be considered the narrative equivalent of the architectural *spolia* medieval inhabitants of former Roman urban spaces would have encountered. Yet, as Amy Remensnyder observes, even as a monument is constructed to fix a particular historical moment and its interpretion, "this meaning is hardly fixed; it is destabilised by memory itself, which over time reinterprets the monument to fit present needs".[25] In the Middle Ages both physical and imagined inscriptions from the imperial past were deployed to give public spaces and architecture new Christian meanings. Stephano Riccioni's discussion of the ecclesiatical and civic efforts to renew the image of Rome in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, for example, emphasises the importance of monumental inscriptions as symbols of authority that could be appropriated for new agendas.[26] In addition to the proliferation of actual "public lettering" on monuments and churches, on liturgical furniture and in open spaces, pilgrim's guides and travel literature also overwrote pagan artefacts as Christian documents.[27] Of particular interest to literary scholars are works such as *Mirabilia Urbis Romae* (1140–1143), in which Benedict, a canon of St Peter's, provides a guide to the Eternal City's sites and monuments which reframes pagan architecture in terms of Christian triumphalism. According to Riccioni, inscriptions play an important role in such a project:

> On the memorial of Caesar, the Needle, near the Vatican, Benedict notes inscriptions in "Latin letters beautifully illuminated." He also transcribes an inscription: Caesar, tantus eras quantus et orbis, / sed nunc in modico clauderis antro (Caesar, you were once as great as the world, / now in what a small cavity are you sealed). Such an inscription never existed on the site. It is a citation of the *Planctus Hlothari I Caesaris*, in which Lothar (d. 855) is called the first caesar, that is emperor.[28]

With this, and other similar inscriptions stemming from literary sources and likely never carved on monuments, Benedict "rewrites" the image of Rome.[29]

The mobilisation of writing in Romanesque architecture following the Gregorian Reform clearly also draws on literary traditions for the symbolic aspects of

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lines 1645–1650 may be the result of a different source being employed. It also works as a kind of free indirect speech.

25 Remensnyder 1996, 884.

26 Riccioni 2011. Coates-Stephens proposes that the great interest in epigraphy displayed by the Franks and Anglo Saxons, on the other hand, was a desire to revive ancient epigraphy transmitted by late antique codices primarily. See Coates-Stephens 2002, 282.

27 Petrucci 1993.

28 Riccioni 2011, 445.

29 Riccioni 2011, 444.

architectonic elements.[30] Inscription on architectural elements makes a space interactive both physically and imaginatively. In his work on medieval doorway inscriptions, Vincent Debiais reminds us: "As medieval reading is a whole body activity that uses the eyes, hands and feet, seeing the text sets the passer-by in motion; it can also cause him to stop in front of the door. It offers the possibility of a journey from the outside to within the building; it could also invite the reader to walk around the church".[31] This movement from outside to inside was emphasised by the portals and porticos featured in the new churches being built, which frequently bore inscriptions. The extension of ecclesiatical space into the medieval urban environment is mediated by writing which here invites the viewer to contemplate the tensions between secular and sacred spaces, rather than between past and present. Riccioni's identification of the visual similarities of these architectural inscriptions to the new luxury liturgical manuscripts of the period emphasises the way writing here, too, is an instrument of prestige: "It seems clear that the display of these inscriptions was as important as the porticoes they graced. Writing in the scripts used in the most sumptuous Bibles and liturgical manuscripts was like displaying a kind of 'banner' of the Church of Rome for those who might recognise the link to manuscript culture".[32] The allegorisation of the church that Kendall delineates in his analysis of Romanesque portal inscriptions highlights how medieval hermeneutical scholarship on Christ's words in John 10:9—"I am the door. By me, if any man enter in, he shall be saved: and he shall go in, and go out, and shall find pastures."—endowed inanimate architectonic elements with symbolic vitality. Given that book culture helped produce such architectural semantics, it should not come as a surprise, then, that similar architectural features appear and are put to various uses in medieval literature from the high Middle Ages onwards.

Of course, we do find some references to inscribed gates or doorways that draw on the physical features of historical environments, both Classical and medieval.[33] The reader interested in inscribed architecture thus faces the challenge of negotiating between symbolically rich *realia* and abstract literary conventions. The description of an inscription dating the foundation of a cloister in the Minnerede *Das weltliche Klösterlein* (c. 1472), for example, is typical of actual epigraphy even though the poem is allegorical. As Linda Safran explains in her overview of public textual cultures

30 For (art) historical analysis of inscription in medieval architecture in the West see (in addition to Petrucci's *Public Lettering*) Kendall 1998. For comparative purposes, see Papalexandrou 2001; Bierman 1998.

31 Debiais 2017, 288.

32 Riccioni 2011, 453.

33 A scene such as Lancelot viewing a fresco depicting Aeneas's adventures in the thirteenth-century *Prosa-Lancelot* has some historical affinity, perhaps, with actual frescos such as the the Schalkaldener *Iwein*. Though the majority of medieval frescos portraying literary texts that remain (such as Arthur Pisanello's Arthurian frescos for Lodovico Gonzaga in Mantua, Luca Signorelli's *Purgatorio* frescos in the Capella di San Brizia, Orvieto Cathedral, the Parzival frescos in the Haus zur Kunkel in Constance) tend to be from the later Middle Ages.

(both Christian and Jewish) in Southern Italy, medieval epigraphy tends to fall under the following categories: dedicatory (staking a claim to a particular act performed by an individual or group); didactic (conveying information); horatory (exhorting readers to act on behalf of the subject of the text); funerary (asserting the piety or status of the deceased); or devotional texts (invocations soliciting divine assistance).[34] Having a sense of the contextual restrictions of historical public texts helps readers to ascertain when narrated architectural inscriptions draw instead on established literary models from visionary texts, such as the gates of the New Jerusalem inscribed with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel in The Revelation of St John 21:12, or didactic texts, like the Arabic *Kalila wa-Dimna*.[35] Thus, when we encounter the doorframes inscribed with individual virtues in the *Tugendburg* (Castle of Virtues) of Reinbot von Durne's *Der Heilige Georg* (mid-thirteenth century) we recognise that we have moved from the mimetic depiction of a semantically-laden material environment to what Béreiziat-Lang's discussion of Ramon Llull characterises as a materialisation of knowledge.[36] This strategy is also evident in what Mary Carruthers terms "architectural" mnemonic techniques, a spatialisation of memory most famously illustrated by the concept of the memory palace.[37]

Of especial interest to literary scholars are narratives which move beyond using inscribed architecture for organisational or informational purposes to explore the performative function of inscription by depicting scenes of reading. While Dante's gate inscription pauses the narrative to contemplate the interpretive dilemma, there are also texts where the inscription itself becomes an actual barrier preventing the movement a threshold invites. Hugo von Montfort's poem no. 28 (c. 1400), for example, features a protagonist whose attempts to enter what he will later discover is the Grail Castle are prevented by a guard who demands that he read the inscriptions on the gate: *und kanst du lesen, / sich eben an das tor! / es mag hart anders wesen, / du beleibist auch davor* ("If you can read, take a look at the gate! It can hardly be otherwise,

34 Safran 2011, 119.

35 See Stephanie Béreiziat-Lang's discussion of this text in the Iberian literature chapter of this volume. As Béreiziat-Lang notes, *Kalila wa-Dimna* is itself a translation of an earlier Sanskrit text, *The Panchatantra*. However, while early scholars claim that the "Tale of the King's Son" is of Indian and Buddhist origin, there is no clear analogue for it in the Sanskrit manuscripts. See Keith-Falconer 1885, "Introduction", 34.

36 Most fascinating are those examples, like the Grail temple in Albrecht's *Der Jungere Titurel* (c. 1260–1275), that straddle various traditions. This temple is built on a divinely-sanctioned model, featuring didactic sculptural/inscriptional programs of religious figures on its interior, and a secular program delineating courtly conduct for knights and ladies on its exterior. Embedded precious stones, whose own allegorical meanings must also be read in order to enter the temple, seem to pose an interpretive impediment. For an analysis of the extraordinary ekphrastic architectural description of the Grail temple, see Brokmann 1999. See also Volfing, 2007.

37 Carruthers 2008, 118ff. For more on the topic of narrated inscription and the memory palace, see the discussion of Chaucer's *House of Fame* in Christine Neufeld's and Ricarda Wagner's chapter on British literature and, in particular, the overview of relevant scholarship in note 48.

you will remain outside", st. 19).[38] The prohibitions against criminals (murderers, traitors, heretics, frauds, thieves, etc.) and the gruesome punishments meted out for their offenses recall civic bylaws and do not deter the speaker from confidently demanding to enter (with *freýem mût*, st. 30). The guard exclaims that either he has not yet read everything or he is a saint (st. 33), directing his attention back to the verses above the gate denying entrance to those who have broken the Ten Commandments or committed any of the Seven Deadly Sins. Now the narrator observes, *ich las die vers, die warent hert* ("I read the verses, they were severe", st. 40) and concedes to the guard that he does not deserve to enter. Thereafter follows a series of lectures delivered by members of the Grail society, similar to the allegorical figures of the Minnerede, offering him spiritual advice. The hardness of the *hert* verses, evoking legal and confessional discursive traditions, presents, I would argue, the harsh "letter of the law" which is then mitigated by the oral guidance of the various teachers encouraging the narrator to strive for grace. Our poet does not ultimately achieve entrance to the castle in the poem but he does progress on his own spiritual path.

The dreamer-poet of Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*, in contrast, achieves entry without insight. Chaucer's dream vision begins when the narrator falls asleep reading Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis* in the hope of learning some *certeyn thing* (20). In his dream Scipio Africanus the Elder guides the poet to an enclosed garden and a gate with *lettres large y-wroghte* (123). While this Garden containing Venus's temple recalls the famous *locus amoenus* in the *Roman de la Rose*, Chaucer clearly models the gate on Dante's, though with significant modifications.[39] The inscription on one half of the gate offers the dreamer a garden of delight: *Thorgh me men gon into that blysful place / Of hertes hele and dedly woundes cure* (127 f.). The inscription on the other half promises only misery: *Thorgh me men gon, /* [...] *Unto the mortal strokes of the spere / Of which Disdayn and Daunger is the gyde*" (134–136). Faced with contradictory inscriptions—one inviting him to *passe in, and sped thee faste!* (133) and the other insisting that *eschewing is only the remedye* (140)—the dreamer is paralysed, a state he characterises in strikingly material terms:

Right as, bitwixen adamauntes two
Of even might, a pece of iren y-set,
That hath no might to meve to ne fro—
[...] *Ferde I; that niste whether me was bet,*
To entre or leve
(148–153)

Right as, between two lodestones [magnets]
Of equal force, a piece of iron is set,
That has no strength to move either to or fro—
[...] Fared I; that did not know whether it was better
[for me] To enter or leave,

38 The citations will be identified by stanza number in the text.

39 The *Roman de la Rose* contains several relatively unremarkable inscriptions. The "high crenelated [garden] wall, sculptured outside and laid out with many fine inscriptions" features personified vices with inscribed *tituli* (129 ff.); a marble fountain features "small letters" cut into the stone indicating that Narcissus died there (1429–1438).

Chaucer critics have long focused on how this paralysis at the gate is emblematic of the principle of indeterminacy or undecidability in the poem, ending as it does with the deferral of the formel eagle's choice between her avian suitors, and the dreamer no closer to learning about that *certeyn thing*.[40] The figurative transformation of the dreamer into an inanimate object, ultimately physically shoved through the gate by his guide (*Affrican my gyde / Me hente, and shoof in at the gates wyde,* 153 f.), highlights his insensibility as well as his immobility. However, this insensibility is not actually detrimental since his guide informs him: *this wryting is nothyng ment by thee* (158).

The gate inscription in the *Parliament of Fowls* is an excellent example of inscriptionality's role in spatial practices that create forms of belonging—marking divisions, for example, in terms of class, gender, race, forms of privilege—through the delineation of separate spheres.[41] Remarkable here is the poem's emphasis of the dreamer's exclusion through the paradoxical revelation that this clearly demarcated threshold is no boundary at all for him because he is not Love's servant (159). The text here may appear undecidable; but in fact it is irrelevant to all but a select few. While historical public texts can certainly address or exclude specific audiences, it is more surprising to find one in an allegorical poem since it refuses the very premise of the dream vision as a narrative created for/by the dreamer. Chaucer flouts the tradition of the architectural inscription which invites interpretation by the proper or designated reader, as in the influential tale of the prophet Daniel at Belshazzar's feast.[42] The neglected inscription, this enigma that will not be decoded, here emphasises the narrator's refusal of the position of authority as the interpreter of texts, the beneficiary of knowledge imparted by venerable guides in books or dreams; it is symptomatic of the ways in which Chaucer grapples with literary tradition and authorship in his corpus more generally.[43] The intertextuality of his gate inscription, moreover, with its clear invocation of Dante, whose gate is also a palimpest of literary allusions, has the potential to reframe how we read those inscriptions as well.

This chapter concludes by considering a short exemplary poem, *Der Heller der armen Frau* (early fourteenth century) to examine the interplay between the ancient tradition of the divine writing on the wall and the mundane world of public textual culture that proliferated in the late Middle Ages. The tale recounts how a king decided to build a cathedral to honour God. When it was completed he commissioned an inscription in golden letters to testify that the church was his initiative, and that he alone had financed it (*daz ez were sin eines rat / und nieman dar an gegeben hat*, 37 f.).

40 In addition to Daniel Pinti 2000 (cited above) see also Minnis/Scattergood/Smith 1995, 215; Aers 1981; Sklute, 1981; Reed 1990; Kelley 1979.

41 On medieval spatial practices see Cassidy-Welch 2010.

42 For more on medieval treatments of the writing on the wall in Daniel, see Christine Neufeld's and Ricarda Wagner's chapter on inscriptions in British literature in this volume.

43 This topic is also addressed in Christine Neufeld's and Ricarda Wagner's British Literature chapter with reference to the architectonic features of his other dream visions.

His assertion of his patronage here, a conventional dedicatory public text with pious aims, is directed as much to a divine as a mortal audience. And it is the divine audience that responds—in unexpected ways. The king's attempt to write this historical moment into his own spiritual ledger through the inscription backfires embarassingly when he discovers that his name has vanished from the wall overnight, replaced instead by an inscription identifying a poor old woman as the true patroness of the church. A second attempt is also replaced overnight, "as God intended" (*als ez Got selbe hete gedaht*, 48). To solve the mystery the king summons the woman who explains that in her desire to donate the little she had to the church, but fearful of the King's prohibition, she had used a halfpenny to buy some hay, which she had strewn on the streets to feed the oxen pulling the stones for the building project. In this charming version of the widow's mite parable from the Synoptic Gospels (Mark 12:41–44, Luke 21:1–4) the old woman's sacrifice makes her gift more precious while also exposing the King's hypocrisy as a kind of spiritual greed.

Understanding how inscriptionality functions in *Der Heller der armen Frau* reveals the exemplum's complexity. Given the literary conventions using architectural inscriptions to illustrate worldly power—the hero's ability to make a mark upon the world—the divine effacement of the king's inscription is a judgment and a reminder of human inconsequentiality in the cosmic scheme of things. If writing in stone represents a human desire to fix a past, a present, or future, the miraculous erasure of the inscription renders the perdurable ephemeral.[44] In fact, this transience—the rapid, competitive over-writing of the texts on the wall—draws attention to the possibility that God's inscription here might be read productively in terms of another form of architectural inscription: graffiti. The king's embarassment at the illicit inscription—he is *versmaht* (44)—suggests that the public text is also a manifestation of his secular sovereignty, which is now compromised. God's intervention comes across at first as an act of vandalism. The poem portrays a struggle for control of the public realm as a social space through the medium of material textual culture, a practice that graffiti stages most dramatically. Like graffiti, God's written intervention is an unsanctioned text applied under cover of darkness; moreover, it is a provocation framed as a challenge to property rights.[45] In this case, both the textual content of the inscription and nature of the inscriptional act challenge the king's sense of entitlement on physical, social, and spiritual levels.

44 It is worth noting that the parable of the widow's mite in Mark is immediately followed by Jesus foretelling the destruction of the temple: "And as he was going out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him: Master, behold what manner of stones and what buildings are here. And Jesus answering, said to him: Seest thou all these great buildings? There shall not be left a stone upon a stone, that shall not be thrown down" (Mark 13:1f.).

45 Medieval graffiti existed historically but is not featured in narrative contexts. I am working here with a more general definition of graffiti, rather than a specific analysis of medieval forms of graffiti. See Mieszkowski 2010.

Graffiti is also writing that is “out of place” which thereby reorganises the space it has overwritten. Here the king is decentred, as his attempts to reinscribe his official narrative demonstrate. The marvel ultimately forces him to become a reader rather than a producer of texts. The inscrutability of this text, the impossibility of a poor old woman being the *stifterinne* (patron, 52) of a cathedral, presents a riddle he and the audience must solve by returning to the figurative architectonics of Christian liturgy. For the divine inscription to be true the material text must dematerialise the architectural project, transforming the cathedral into a spiritual representation of the Church. In this case, the metamorphosis effected in the king through his recognition of the woman’s virtue has the potential to transform society itself in that he embraces a redistribution of material modeled on the poor woman’s logic. The king’s evaluation of the material world changes when he has to recognise that he is a node in a much more complicated network than he previously realised—one made up of coins, hay, oxen, poor people, buildings and the divine. Just as the woman serves God by feeding the working animals on the building site, the king now rewards the virtuous woman (*er mache die vrowen riche an gute sicherliche*, 89f.) and in turn has this service acknowledged by God (99f.). *Der Heller der armen Frau* is fascinating as a moralising commentary on historical public textual culture, perceptively illustrating the private interests and unconsidered consequences of the late medieval patronage of building projects whose public texts we still study.[46] It is also a text richly informed by the imagined architectural inscriptions of medieval literary culture. Its brilliance lies in its focus on the act of inscription itself. Presenting an original adaptation of the widow’s mite, the tale recalls, above all, the Book of Daniel. But here, instead of an ominious warning numbering a ruler’s days, the *digitus Dei* playfully writes a more just world into being.

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46 We see William Langland express similar concerns in *Piers Plowman*. Cf. Christine Neufeld’s and Ricarda Wagner’s chapter on inscriptions in British literature.

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