Innovation and Resistance: Sacred Epigraphy in Medieval Arezzo (twelfth-thirteenth centuries)

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Abstract

Most of the information that each of us can acquire, walking through a modern city, comes to us through the reading of alphabetic messages. This finding, for us quite obvious, must not make us forget that the information is characterized by types of writing that, in most cases, use letters chosen with the intention to draw our attention even before communicating a certain message. Writings in general, but especially those exposed and therefore subject to reading by multiple people, are characterized by non-random choices of graphical models. To fully understand this phenomenon, present in all periods, and especially in the Middle Ages, one will have to take into account not only the classic inscriptions of stone and marble but also writings, artifacts and inscriptions on windows or painted wood, products of the cultural context which desired, commissioned and produced such testimonies. In this regard, and particularly concerning medieval writings, it is interesting to observe the exposed production from the Arezzo area of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Especially in those places of the city which are most representative, such as those tied to the sacred, the Arezzo artifacts show an evolution characterized by graphic tradition and innovation aiming to communicate symbolic and representative ideas.

Key words
Medieval Epigraphy, Palaeography, publicity writing, Arezzo, Giotto, Cimabue

La maggior parte delle indicazioni che ognuno di noi può acquisire, camminando per una città moderna, ci arrivano attraverso la lettura di un messaggio di tipo alfabetico. Questa constatazione, per noi del tutto ovvia, non ci deve far dimenticare che tali informazioni sono caratterizzate da tipi di scrittura che, nella maggior parte dei casi, utilizza delle lettere scelte con l'intenzione di attirare la nostra attenzione ancor prima di comunicare un certo messaggio. Le scritture in genere, ma soprattutto quelle esposte e quindi soggette alla lettura di più persone contemporaneamente, sono caratterizzate da scelte di modelli grafici non casuali. Per comprendere appieno questo fenomeno, presente in tutte le epoche e soprattutto nel periodo medievale, si dovranno tenere in considerazione non soltanto le classiche epigrafi di pietra e marmo ma scritture quali oggetti d'uso e iscrizioni su vetrate o pitture lignee frutto dell'ambito culturale che tali testimonianze ha voluto, commissionato e prodotto.
A questo proposito, per quanto riguarda le manifestazioni scritte medievali, è interessante osservare la produzione esposta di area aretina attribuibile ai secoli XII e XIII. Essa fornisce, soprattutto in luoghi particolari della città maggiormente rappresentativi quali quelli legati al sacro, un'evoluzione

caratterizzata da tradizione e innovazione grafica al fine di comunicare una certa idea simbolica e rappresentativa.

Parole chiave
Epigrafia Medievale, Paleografia, scritture esposte, Arezzo, Giotto, Cimabue

Travelling through our contemporary cities, crossing roads or bridges with our cars or simply wandering around the town center on foot, walking in a market, a shopping center, a place of cultural or religious interest, we are often hit by a great amount of messages. Such messages are registered in our minds but, often, we fail to remember the actual shapes with which such indications were expressed.

Most of these suggestions are alphabetical messages but we often forget that they are characterized by a writing that results from formal and stylistic choices.

If we examine carefully the exact disposition of those indications and especially the lettering used for the messages, we will inevitably realize that graphic shapes are not casual and that they are not an invention of contemporary times. Rather, they are the result of research and graphic solutions which aim to illustrate a product and to establish an immediate communication. They capture our attention thanks to graphic solutions and compositions and through the characterization of the message with the use of particular letter forms.

Many centuries before the invention of contemporary cities, this same concept of harmony and proportion of the script and the letter-forms was applied by both those who commissioned a particular message and those who executed it. This concept is visible on inscriptions of all periods, from the antiquity to our days and especially in the Middle Ages[1].

In this way like it is necessary to ponder the exact disposition of volumes in architecture, the organization of the space in visual art or the use of notes in

[1] Regarding exposed writings, it is pertinent to remember the words of Armando Petrucci: "qualsiasi tipo di scrittura concepito per essere usato, ed effettivamente usato, in spazi aperti, o anche in spazi chiusi, al fine di permettere una lettura plurima (di gruppo o di massa) ed a distanza di un testo scritto su di una superficie esposta". Cfr. A. PETRUCCI, *Potere, spazi urbani, scritture esposte: proposte ed esempi*, in *Culture et idéologie dans le genèse del'état moderne, Actes de la table ronde organisée par le Centre national de la recherche scientifique et l'École française de Rome (Rome, 15-17 octobre 1984)*, Rome, École française de Rome, 1985 (Collection de l'École française de Rome, 82), pp. 85-97.

a melodic composition, also writing is subject to the choice of graphic elements (circular and linear) that have ancient origins.

Exposed writings are specifically produced for impact; for this reason, the letter forms are not casual and must be seen through the evolution of graphic models, the fashion of their time, dictated by cultural necessities. Written testimonials have always, in fact, been equipped with graphic types and a different value according to their purpose. However at the same time they have become, even if on different media, a manifestation of a unique feel and interpretation of the script – or indeed of written culture in general – that underlies the operation of writing a codex, drafting a document or engraving an epigraph.

The need to display a message in the most effective manner possible by executing prior graphic choices becomes the necessary means for the creation of cultural memory through a written medium.

To fully understand this phenomenon, it is useful to examine not only inscriptions on hard surfaces, like metal, stone or marble, but also on objects of common use. For Medieval times, in fact, it is indispensable to observe text painted on wood, inscriptions on church windows, and to take into consideration the environment that desired, commissioned, and created such messages.

Doing so often reveals, in particular places of the city, an important evolution characterized by graphic innovations and resistances, which occurred, as stated previously, either unconsciously or consciously by the person that planned the surface dedicated to the script[2]. With regard to medieval inscriptions, it is interesting to observe the exposed texts from the XII and XIII centuries in the Arezzo area, especially in certain areas of the

[2] Cfr. A. PETRUCCI, *La scrittura. Ideologia e rappresentazione*, Torino, Einaudi, 1986; ID., *Le scritture ultime: ideologia della morte e strategie dello scrivere nella tradizione occidentale*, Torino, Einaudi, 1995; ID., *Spazi e forme nella memoria medievale*, in *Arti e storia nel Medioevo, III. Del vedere: pubblici, forme e funzioni*, a cura di E. Castelnuovo e G. Sergi, Torino, Einaudi, 2004, pp. 551-566.

city characterized by graphic innovation and resistance[3]. Sacred locations are a perfect example because they represent an important part of the medieval city and its model of writing. These places have a dual advantage. Firstly, these places are highly representative of the medieval city: precisely because of their sacred nature, they have contributed to the physical preservation of written objects. Secondly, these places are also particularly representative of those graphic models that were deemed worthy and appropriate for the tradition of a certain symbolic idea, and representative of the script to be displayed to the masses. Some of the most representative models of this graphic concept are the crucifixes placed in crossroads or other important locations of the city.

The twelfth century stone crucifix, which is the result of local manufacture, shows Christ carved in the traditional way and enriched at the foot with the three mountains in the double form. In this testimonial, however, there is no graphic insertion, not even the typical scroll with the inscription INRI, which is present in many contemporary accounts with a certain consistency, and also in much later testimonials. Another example dating from the end of the twelfth or the beginning of the thirteenth century illustrates a completely different and innovative situation. This cross (fig. 1), exhibited at the Arezzo Museum of Medieval and Modern Art and previously conserved in the collection of the Fraternita dei Laici, was probably originally located in the old civic hospital[4]. The presence of the script at the head of the cross is

[3] P. REFICE, *Verso Cimabue. Crocefissi e Croci dipinte nella diocesi di Arezzo (secoli XII-XIII). Mostra e itinerario urbano,* (Arezzo, Cattedrale loggia di San Donato, 7 aprile 2001-6 gennaio 2002), Arezzo 2001, pp. 14-17; A. DEL GROSSO, *Croci viarie del Museo Statale di Arte Medievale Moderna di Arezzo*, in *Arte in terra d'Arezzo. Il Medioevo*, a cura di M. Collaretta e P. Refice, Firenze, Edifir, 2010, pp. 45-48; F. CERVINI, *Statuaria Lignea*, in *Arte in terra d'Arezzo* cit., p. 119.

[4] A. DEL GROSSO, *Croci viarie del Museo Statale di Arte Medievale Moderna di Arezzo* cit., pp. 45-48, fig. 32.

emblematic of the public written culture around the year 1200[5]:

I(E)H(SU)S NAZAREN(US) REX IUDEOR(UM)

I(E)H(SU)S NAZAREN(US) Q(UI) P(RO) NOB(IS) PEPE(N)DIT I(N)

Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews

Jesus of Nazareth who was hung on the cross for us.

The first part of the message is positioned above the head, in a traditional form; the second part is written along the arms, which is innovative.

This inscription consists of letters that we can define as epigraphical Gothic capital, a style that corresponds to the historic period, but it is also possible to find elements from the previous historic period, such as letters of Romanesque origin[6].

For example we can see a double form of letters like the letter N in capital Romanesque and in capital Gothic; there is also a particular kind of letter Z in capital form and made like a strange S with an oblique line that crosses the letter. The presence of the abbreviations is worth noting: the letter P in its cut form for PRO; a type of apostrophe above the letter B (in minuscule lettering) standing for the IS of NOB(IS). Other abbreviations are inscribed in a special area of the surfaces, like in the production of books. There are letters from both Romanesque and Gothic capitals. The fusion is so elaborate that it is difficult to read, and would probably be perceived just as decoration by the majority of medieval people who were illiterate.

In this sense another example is found in a pair of crucifixes in painted

[5] For other considerations about sacred inscriptions it is possible to see a testimony concerning the figure of saint Francisco of Assisi, found in the same territory of Arezzo. Cfr. L. MAGIONAMI, *Hoc Capitale Tenui. Il cuscino di s. Francesco a Cortona e la sua iscrizione,* in *L'eredità del Padre. Le reliquie di s. Francesco a Cortona,* a cura di S. Allegria e S. Gatta, Padova Edizioni Messaggero Padova, 2007, pp. 121-140.

[6] L. MAGIONAMI, *Ordinare et sculpere: Arezzo, los casos de los siglos XII y XIII,* in *Impaginatio en las incripciones medievales,* a cura di V. García Lobo y M.E. Martín López, Leon, Corpus Iscriptionum Hispaniae Medievalium©, 2011, p. 48, fig. 4.

wood[7], (fig. 2 and 3) where it is possible to point out another innovation: the inscription is neither above Christ's head nor along the arms of the cross but on the drapery worn by the figure.

The first crucifix dates from the end of the XII century (fig. 2) and the second from the beginning of the following century[8] (fig. 3). They easily lend themselves to a comparative study of the graphics involved because the text is the same and it is thus possible to see the graphic decisions that were made on the letters used in each. The inscription for both is:

REX REGUM ET/

DOMINUS DOMINANTIUM

King of Kings/ Lord of Lords.

In the first crucifix[9], the disposition of the letters (which can be seen in greater detail on fig. 4) is made to look like a writing embroidered on drapery, and is Romanesque except for the letter E of uncial origin in its Gothic development. The letters D and N, which are usually in Gothic form, even in Romanesque inscription, here, are clearly in Romanesque form. The fact that the letters are well distanced from one another confers to the entire inscription a sense of being monumental, nearly an echo of antique values.

The second crucifix[10], made just a few years later, is even more innovative. As can be seen (fig. 5), in the first part REX REGUM ET the same letters are used but in the second DOMIN(US) DOMINA(N)TIU(M) the letters

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[7] A.M. MAETZKE, *I tre crocifissi medievali della Cattedrale di Arezzo*, in *La bellezza del Sacro. Sculture medievali policrome. Catalogo della Mostra (Arezzo, 2002-2003),* a cura di A.M. Maetzke, Arezzo 2002, pp. 15-26; M. SEMFF, *Zur drei romanischen Holzkruzifixen aus dem Dom von Arezzo*, in "Zeitschrift des Deutschen Vereins für Kunstwissenschaft", XLI, 1987, pp. 16-27.

[8] F. CERVINI, *Statuaria Lignea* cit., pp. 114-118.

[9] Ivi, pp. 114-115 e figg. 119 e 120.

[10] Ivi, pp. 116-117 e figg. 121 e 122.

are completely different. This cross presents more forms of Gothic lettering like d in its uncial form and also m and n in minuscule letter form, in addition to many abbreviations of the library kind. The writing shows an evolution of graphic taste towards the Gothic, to the point that even in the same group of words there is a mixture of different graphic models like the letter M in both its Gothic and Romanesque forms. It stands out as an attempt to move away from the Romanesque world to embrace the more modern Gothic reality.

Other important representations from this period are the sculptures of the artist Marchionne situated in the Pieve of Santa Maria[11]. They are placed above the main door, where there is a lunette with a series of figures and their names. Among these figures, Maria stands in the middle, with the two archangels – Michael and Gabriel - at her side, followed on both sides by the patron saints of Arezzo: Satiro and Donato and, at last, six apostles for each part. Underneath, an inscription indicates the year of composition, and the names of the sculptor (Marchionne), the commissioner Matteo and the clergyman in charge known as Zenonis[12] or Zanni[13].

ANNI D(OMINI) MCCXVI M(ENSI) MADII MARCHIO SCULPSIT

P(RES)H(ITE)R MATH(EU)S MUNERA FULSIT I(N) T(EM)P(OR)E ARCHI

P(RES)B(ITERI)I Z(ANNI)

11 A.M. MAETZKE, *Il portale maggiore della Pieve di Santa Maria Assunta in Arezzo*, in *La bellezza del Sacro* cit., pp. 27-37; G. CURZI, *Gli scultori della Pieve*, in *Arte in terra d'Arezzo* cit., pp. 131-133, fig. 141; ID., *Marchionne: la lastra con l'adorazione dei Magi e la decorazione scultorea della Pieve di Santa Maria ad Arezzo*, in *Atti e Memorie dell'Accademia Petrarca di Lettere, Arti e Scienze*, LXXI (2009), pp. 149-188.

12 M. SALMI, *L'architettura romanica nel territorio aretino*, in "Rassegna d'arte", XV, 2, 1915, p. 138.

13 U. PASQUI, U. VIVIANI, *Guida illustrata storica, artistica e commerciale di arezzo e dintorni,* Arezzo, Soc. Tip. Aretina, 1925, p. 104; A. TAFI, *La Pieve di S. Maria in Arezzo*, Cortona, Calosci, 1994, p. 65.

In this example all the writing is Gothic as if the taste of the time was firmly identified with that style. But looking above this representation we can see another composition representing the cycle of the months of the year that surprises the visitor with its distinctive diversity. Indeed, from the same period, in the same church and on the same façade, this composition stands out as a completely singular example of contrast of figurative models and writing[14]. It consists of a symbolic personalization of the twelve months with their associated activities and names anticipated by HIC EST: this is[15].

Thus January is represented by a two-faced Janus, followed by February and March performing various tasks (fig. 6); April has flowers; it is followed by May going to war and June with the harvesting of the wheat (fig. 7); July with other activities, August with the preparation of barrels for wine made from the grapes harvested in September (fig. 8); Finally, October is sowing seeds, November pulling out turnips, and December killing the pig (fig. 9). The Calendar is an excellent example of representation of the time in the medieval period but it isn't an exception as we can see similar models in cities like Pisa[16], Modena[17] or Parma[18] and above all the example of cathedral of Ferrara[19]. This representation, very popular and appealing to the lower class, particularly the farmers, is very far from the magnificent and superb representation of the traditional sacred context. The two images show a

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14 M. ARMANDI, *I mesi. Il tempo dell'uomo*, in *La bellezza del Sacro* cit., pp. 27-37.

15 G. CURZI, *Gli scultori della Pieve* cit., pp. 134-135, figg. 143-145.

16 A. CALECA, *La dotta mano. Il battistero di Pisa,* Bergamo, Bolis, 1991, pp. 39-69.

17 C. FRUGONI, *Il ciclo dei mesi nella "Porta della peschiera" del Duomo,* in *La porta della Peschiera nel Duomo di Modena*, Modena, Franco Cosimo Panini, 1991, pp. 13-31; A. CAMPANA, *La testimonianza delle Iscrizioni di Lanfranco e Wiligelmo. Il Duomo di Modena,* Modena, Franco Cosimo Panini, 1984, pp. 363-375; S. LOMARTIRE, *Schede,* in *Lanfranco e Wiligelmo* cit., pp. 390-394.

18 C. FRUGONI, *"E vedrà ogni carne la salvezza di Dio": le sculture allinterno del Battistero di Parma,* in *Benedetto Antelami e il Duomo di Parma,* a cura di C. Frugoni, Torino, Einaudi, 1995, pp. 109-144; G. ROMANO, *Benedetto Antelami e il Battistero di Parma,* in *Battistero di Parma,* Parma, Cassa di Risparmio di Parma, 1992, pp. 65-79.

19 In fact a specific study makes a comparation between the scupltures of Arezzo and Ferrara. Cfr. G. DE FRANCOVICH, *Benedetto Antelami: Architetto e scultore e l'arte del suo tempo*, Milano, Electa, 1952, pp. 445-449; G. TIGLER, *La porta dei mesi del duomo di Ferrara e le sue derivazioni ad Arezzo, Fidenza e Traù,* in *I magistri commacini*, Spoleto, CISAM, 2009, pp. 827-935.

contrast of style, particularly evident in the writing. The lettering is in its entirety of Romanesque capital type closer to the popular and illiterate classes, which perhaps, without even understanding the actual meaning of the words, recognized the concept as something familiar.

Except for the minuscule letter h and d of uncial type in Gothic form, all the other letters are in Capital Romanesque. It is particularly interesting to see the letters M and N: the second in a mirror form, an element found in previous crucifixes. There are entire phrases in mirror form which could be due to the artist's desire to follow the figures' action with the inscription[20]. I believe, however, that it results from an erroneous inversion of preparatory panels used for the design to be followed by the sculptor who carved the script. Analyzing other iconographic and graphic models halfway between innovation and tradition we can find two other interesting examples from the thirteen century: two crucifixes preserved in Arezzo, which are the product of excellent medieval artists.

Past the door just described, the visitor will find the first crucifix by Margaritone[21] (fig. 11). In this case the inscription is placed once again in the traditional manner above Christ's head probably because it was meant to be very representative and for this reason, followed the traditional style (fig. 10). Despite the position of the writing, however, the letter form is innovative: the Gothic writing is used with typical minuscule letters (like H, N and E of uncial type) mixed with capital letters and abbreviations of library tradition.

Another masterpiece placed in the church of San Domenico is a good element of comparison (fig. 12). This crucifix by Cimabue shows a further evolution of the writing and stylistic concept[22]. The letters taken singularly aren't like the typical vertical shape of the Gothic writing, usual for library, but rather the epigraphic type.

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[20] G. TIGLER, *La porta dei mesi del duomo di Ferrara e le sue derivazioni ad Arezzo* cit., pp. 73-78.
[21] A. MONCIATTI, *Margarito, l'artista e il mito*, in *Arte in terra d'Arezzo* cit., pp. 221-222, fig. 259.
[22] L. BELLOSI, *La croce aretina di Cimabue*, *Arte in terra d'Arezzo* cit., pp. 207-211, figg. 241-243.

One peculiarity of this example is that every letter has been given the same dimension in height and width and can fit in an ideal square. Moreover, the space between one letter and the other and between one word and another conveys a strong sense of grandeur reinforced by its rigorous bi-linearity. The letters, in both capital and minuscule forms, have the same heights and they touch in the same manner the ideal upper and lower lines of containment of the writing (fig. 13).

This is another inscription that can be defined as innovative because the letter forms are current for their time but are disposed in an antique fashion. Thus "tradition and innovation" were merged to create a modern product with a strong sense of the past.

We can conclude that in Arezzo, in the same period, the XII and XIII centuries, the writing was involved in a graphic evolution that, starting from Romanesque capital letters arrived to a completely Gothic reality. If this graphic evolution, with a continuous tendency towards innovative models, can be considered normal, the spaces of writing are exceptional. The disposition of the letters inside the reserved space for the communication through sacred art is much anchored in traditional and monumental models, referring to the Romanesque time. Regarding great sacred representations, from an innovative disposition of the writing on drapery we go back to the traditional placards above Christ's head. Therefore, in a continuous movement between innovation and resistance, the examples discussed in this paper are clear evidence of how resistance is a fundamental part of innovation. Innovation and tradition are present in these exposed writings in sacred art that are testimonies of beauty and representative significance. A choice that finds its origins in the concept of *Opera Mirabilis:* a testimony so important to be read with the heart rather than with the eyes. And in this case these writings on sacred objects can be considered inspired by and in perfect continuity with the divine lesson found in Psalm 119: *mirabilia testimonia tua, ideo Servavit ea anima mea*, your testimonies are wonderful: therefore my soul has sought them.

Fig. 1. Crucifix on Stone (XII-XIII Century). Museum of Medieval and Modern Art of Arezzo. [Archivio Magionami]

Fig. 2. Crucifix (XII Century). Mudas Museum, Museo Diocesano di Arte Sacra of Arezzo. [Archivio Magionami]

Fig. 3. Crucifix (XIII Century). Mudas Museum, Museo Diocesano di Arte Sacra of Arezzo. [Archivio Magionami]

Fig. 4. Crucifix (XII Century). Mudas Museum, Museo Diocesano di Arte Sacra of Arezzo. Particular of Inscription: *Rex Regum et Dominus Dominantium*. [Archivio Magionami]

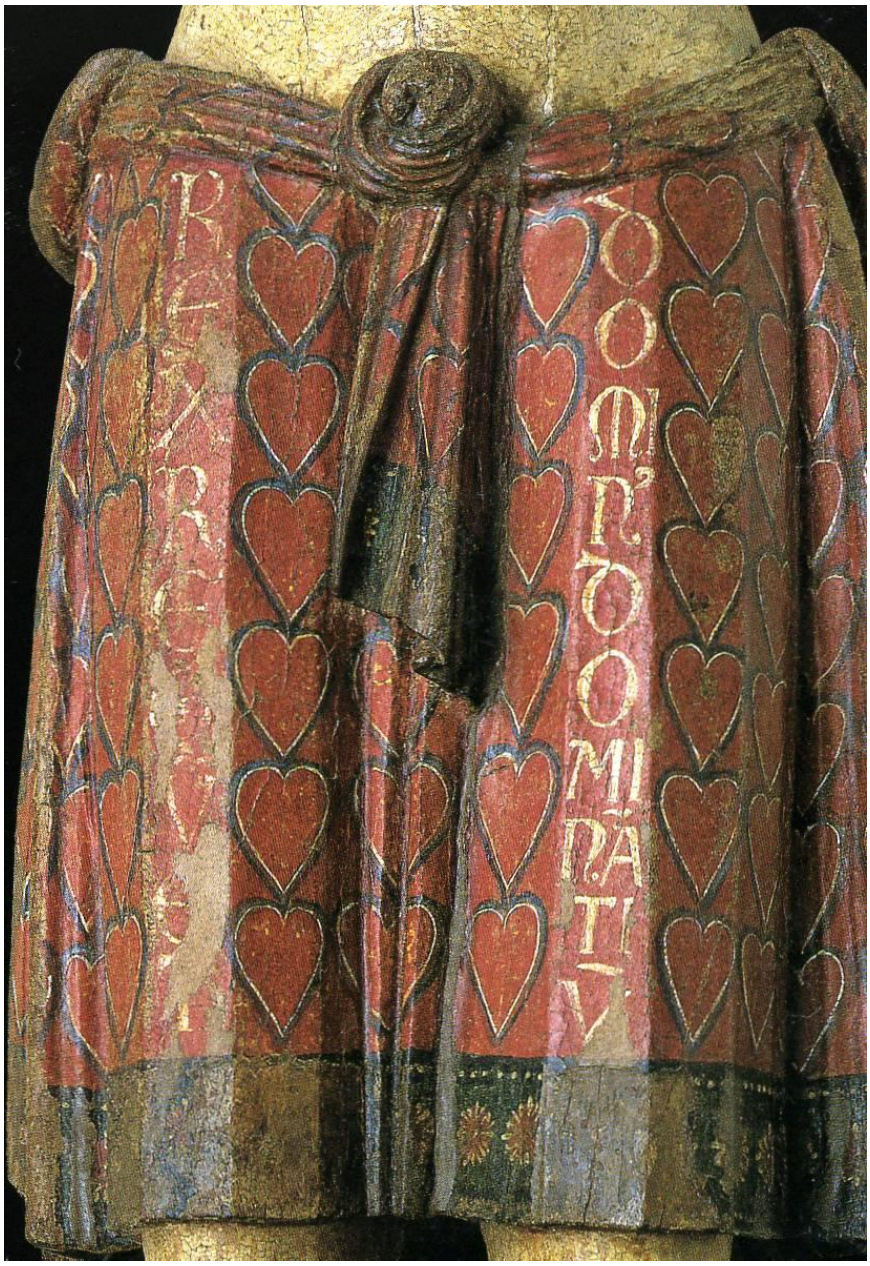

Fig. 5. Crucifix (XIII Century). Mudas Museum, Museo Diocesano di Arte Sacra of ArezzoParticular of Inscription: *Rex Regum et Dominus Dominantium*. [Archivio Magionami]

Fig. 6. Cycle of the months (XIII Century). Pieve di Santa Maria Arezzo of Arezzo Particular of inscription: *hic est Bifrons Ianuarius. Hic est Februarius. Hic est Martius.* [Archivio Magionami]

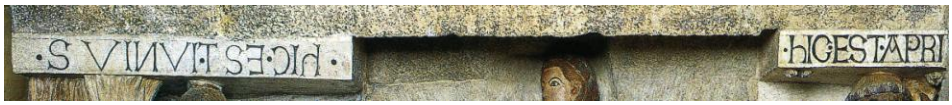

Fig. 7. Cycle of the months (XIII Century). Pieve di Santa Maria Arezzo of Arezzo. Particular of inscription: *hic est aprilis. Hic est Iunius.* [Archivio Magionami]

Fig. 8. Cycle of the months (XIII Century). Pieve di Santa Maria Arezzo of Arezzo. Particular of inscription: *hic est Iulius. Hic est Augustus. Hic est September.* [Archivio Magionami]

Fig. 9. Cycle of the months (XIII Century). Pieve di Santa Maria Arezzo of Arezzo Particular of inscription:.*Hic est October. Hic est november. Hic est December.* [Archivio Magionami]

Fig. 10. Crucifix by Margaritone (XIII Century). Pieve di Santa Maria of Arezzo. [Archivio Magionami]

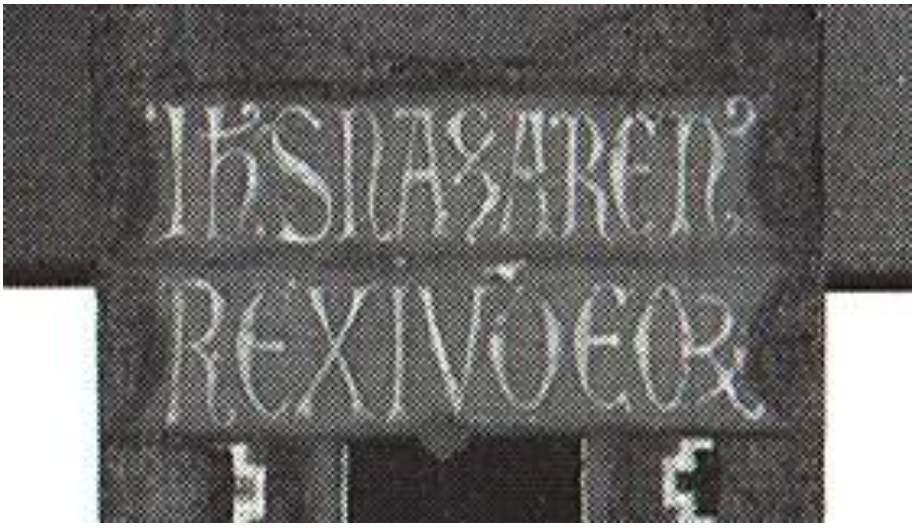

Fig. 11. Crucifix by Margaritone (XIII Century). Pieve di Santa Maria Arezzo of Arezzo Particular of inscription: *Iehsus Nazarenus Rex Iudeorum*. [Archivio Magionami]

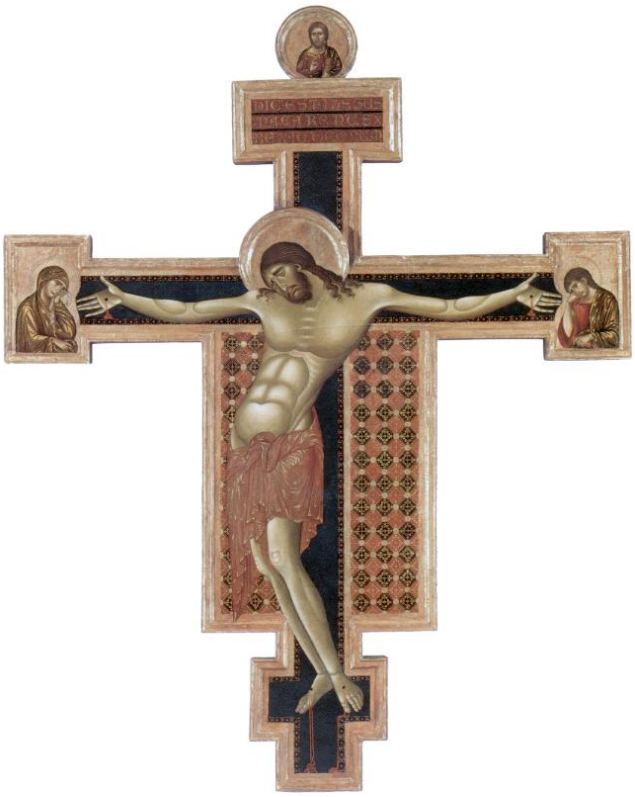

Fig. 12. Crucifix by Cimabue (XIII Century). Church of San Domenico, Arezzo. [Archivio Magionami]

Fig. 13. Crucifix by Cimabue (XIII Century). Church of San Domenico , Arezzo. Particular of inscription: *Hic est Iehsus Nazarenus Rex Iudeorum.* [Archivio Magionami]

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