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Qualities, Features, and Fashion - Theoretical Notes on the Epigraphic Minuscule

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► **To cite this version:**

Vincent Debiais. Qualities, Features, and Fashion - Theoretical Notes on the Epigraphic Minuscule. Jonatan Pettersson; Anna Blennow. Models of Change in Medieval Textual Culture, De Gruyter, pp.255-284, 2024, 978-3-11-061229-5. <10.1515/9783110613353-008>. <halshs-04842589>

HAL Id: halshs-04842589

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04842589v1>

Submitted on 17 Dec 2024

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Vincent Debais

8 Qualities, Features, and Fashion – Theoretical Notes on the Epigraphic Minuscule

The “Qualities of Inscriptions”

Would it be an exaggeration to say that the analysis of script in Latin medieval inscriptions rests on the tacit pillar of judgement in terms of the “quality” of the epigraphic object? It would certainly be taking a historiographic shortcut by covering in one assertion half a century of publications, studies, and reports.¹ It would also place under a single hat scholarly traditions that are so different that they prevent comparisons, and at times, discussions between the Spanish, French, Italian, and German “schools”. Finally, it would flatten the complexity of certain highly specific palaeographic analyses that are attentive to the description and observation of epigraphic writing without dwelling on the formal and aesthetic value of the produced object. It would thus be an exaggeration, but for all that would it be false?

Clarification should be made in attempting to respond to this question in a nuanced manner, regarding the general notion of *quality*, which covers two essential aspects.² The first, neutral and in theory absolute, is the definition of the *form* in which writing is presented on a given object, a form that can be identified, characterised, and possibly distinguished – a form that can thus be “qualified”. The second aspect, which is relative, or even subjective, is the appreciation of the level of a given writing’s formal perfection, which makes it possible to situate it on the epigraphic standards scale – this understanding of “quality” assumes a “connection” between one script and another. And yet, this “quality” relative to the writing of inscriptions is established tacitly (and most likely unconsciously) based on numerous and disparate criteria.³ Quality is thus established based on the degree of technical preparation of

1 For partial historiographic assessments of the epigraphic discipline, see Favreau (1989a, 1995), Lambert (2004), and Treffort (2007a). See also Koch (2004).

2 On the notion of “quality” and its application in the social sciences, see Musselin et al (2002).

3 It is sufficient to analyse the content of the inscriptions from the great European collections and examine the qualitative adjectives used to convey to the reader a visual sensation born from the formal, aesthetic, and technical properties of inscriptions. The editor often gets caught up in playing with the assigned description to make the inscription more readable and allow themselves to be guided by

Note: I wish to express my sincerest gratitude to Estelle Ingrand-Varenne for her generous and pertinent review of this work. Our points of discussion show how much the palaeographic research of inscriptions still needs to clarify its methods and historical investigations. I also want to thank the translator for the wonderful work done on the original in French.

the medium (ruling and margins) and the disposition of the text within the epigraphic area – a good-quality epigraphic object is an inscription arranged in a consistent, harmonious manner, helped by the use of punctuation or a frame. Quality is also established based on the degree of “formalism” in the engraving of the script – the letters of a “good” inscription convey a mastered technical skill of hand, a specific expertise, confident tracing that avoids the cursivity of the *ductus*; a clear-cut, sculpted, outlined script; a script with no sign of hand-writing.⁴ Quality is still based on the evident aesthetic research from which writing has benefited, which is generally expressed by graphic overindulgence, either by adding complementary features to the simple architecture of the character (bead moulding, reduplication, vegetal elements, etc.), or the combination of characters and plays on letters (conjunctions, interlocked letters, superscriptions, etc.).⁵ Finally, quality is evaluated according to the expected correspondence between the script on an object and its model, the graphic archetype that is assumed to have been in use at the time when the inscription was made⁶ – this theoretical script whose existence has been established through the accumulation of examples, and by the presupposition according to which the letter forms evolve over time, and which allows us to say whether the script is “archaic” when it appears to be from a time earlier than the date of the inscription, “consistent” when it corresponds to its time, or “strange” when there is nothing coherent or satisfying from a chronological point of view.⁷

If we retain the dual meaning of the notion of quality (characterisation and appreciation) on one hand, and if we make an inventory of the criteria involved in establishing the relative quality of the inscription on the other, it is not likely wrong to consider that it is indeed this notion that underlies most of the analyses of writing in medieval epigraphy. Several historiographic reasons can probably explain this fact, but it seems that epigraphy has spent most of its early years under the influence of palaeography, and to a lesser extent, of diplomatics; this led the study of inscriptions

what they feel or envisage about the inscription rather than by what they are capable of actually “describing”. In any other instance, this is the narrative trap denounced by Marin (1978).

4 On this matter, see the already old but essential remarks by Durliat (1980).

5 The consideration of these different criteria, which cannot be brought together as part of an intrinsic and measurable quality of the inscription, is, however, at the origin of the establishment of a hierarchy of values and locations of epigraphic production, particularly in the Spanish epigraphic school. See, among others, Martín López (2007), and García Morilla (2014).

6 Much work has been done that seeks to put manuscript and epigraphic forms in relation to one another; see, in particular, the important methodological proposition of Caramello (2012) which discusses certain technical and analytical pitfalls to avoid.

7 In fact, the questions of archaism, innovation, and modernity are very difficult to deal with in the Humanities and social sciences. On this subject, see Hartog (2003), and Sablayrolles (2007). See also Zumthor (1967).

to import certain taxonomic principles from the analysis of manuscripts.⁸ These principles, insofar as they are not found as such in epigraphic objects – the making of an inscription is a graphic process that differs from handwriting from most points of view – borrow theoretical models of writing that epigraphy uses to compare and evaluate the graphic forms of inscriptions. If any correspondence does exist between the model and the object, the quality of the inscription is high; if there is any divergence, the quality of the inscription is low. What was considered taxonomy in palaeography became the scale of values in epigraphy; the perverseness of this shift resides in the fact that it had imposed writing from the manuscript world as the “model” or “standard” for epigraphic writing.⁹ The second historiographic reason explaining the systematic reliance on the notion of quality is linked to the obligation imposed on epigraphy, mainly by art history and archaeology, to assign a date to inscriptions.¹⁰ Although a large number of epigraphic documents do not bear any chronological indication, analysing the script becomes the main criterion for establishing the date of the object, either in an absolute way by comparing it with what we know about manuscript forms, or in a relative way by classifying the inscriptions based on the degree to which their graphic forms have evolved. What was once a qualification (in the neutral meaning of “evaluation”) is now used for an evolutionary vision of script that must follow, in inscriptions, the progress made in the realm of manuscripts.

Most of the work produced in the field of medieval epigraphy emphasises its own “youth” and inexperience, and it has been doing so for nearly forty years now, which is not without irony.¹¹ This youth, this adolescence required the guidance of more mature fields such as palaeography, diplomatics, codicology, and philology in order to establish a work method and publishing criteria. The fact remains that this peculiar history of scholarship has made epigraphy subordinate to other scientific sub-branches of medieval studies, which is not problematic. However, this has also made the object of epigraphy, the inscription, subordinate to other graphic phenomena of the Middle Ages, which is much more troublesome. The assessment of quality is thus carried out “based on” palaeographic expectations, while almost no one discusses the epigraphic relevance.¹² In this epistemological situation, inscriptions do not seem to exist autonomously, and the epigraphic hypothesis and its forms are only collateral or incidental to manuscript writing. This has nothing to do with lambasting comparative studies between inscriptions

8 For links between palaeography and epigraphy for the Middle Ages, see the group survey “Epigrafia e Paleografia, inchiesta sui rapporti fra due discipline”, *Scrittura e Civiltà* 5 (1981) in which Robert Favreau points out that “epigraphic material can contribute to the study of the function and diffusion of writing”. For the full range of methodological contributions, see also the doctoral thesis of Caramello (2015).

9 This can be best measured by the Spanish school’s systematic application of diplomatic categories to inscriptions; see for example García Lobo & Martín López (2011).

10 On this subject see Debiais (2019).

11 See Pereira (2017).

12 See for example García Morilla (2018) or Rodríguez Suárez (2010a).

and manuscripts; to the contrary, it is the only way to approach medieval written culture in the diversity of its forms, functions, intentions, and effects. However, we must be careful not to invert the heuristic process; we must evaluate in order to compare, not compare in order to evaluate. On this point, medieval epigraphy still has theoretical work to do to finally rid itself of this weighty family tutelage, and it must do so quickly so that it can thus pass from its subordinate role to a dialogue between peers.

The re-establishment of an evaluative neutrality, free recourse to comparisons, and the recognition of a documentary autonomy are conditions to reinstate, especially when envisioning the numerous changes that affect the practice of Middle Age inscriptions in western Europe. This is not the place to make an inventory of scripts, languages, prosodic forms, dispositions, support, locations, content, and functions of medieval inscriptions, and to do so, it is sufficient to view the great European collections, which are now accessible online in France and Germany in particular.¹³ This diversity at all levels gives the impression that very disparate practices existed for creating inscriptions, whose forms seem to have been adapted to each unique communicative circumstance and whose variety and absence of *format* were the principle characteristics. Within this very unstable formal panorama of epigraphic objects, it is also easy to identify sets of inscriptions based on similarities, common features, shared qualities, while recognising profound changes or radical discontinuities in the epigraphic practice is complicated. We can make a few exceptions for some of the more prominent changes, knowing that it would be necessary to discuss each one precisely and consider the geography and chronology of the transformations. The first of these changes is the exponential increase in the number of epigraphic objects produced during the Middle Ages, with a peak in the first half of the fifteenth century when exposed writing takes the control of public spaces, primarily in urban centres.¹⁴ The use of vernacular languages side by side with Latin starts at the end of the twelfth century, and even more so in the thirteenth century.¹⁵ We also witness an extreme diversification of textual content from the 1200s onwards with a relative loss of pre-eminence on the part of funerary inscriptions.¹⁶ Finally, we can identify main

13 For France, the online platform *Persée* (URL in bibliography) offers the vast majority of the volumes from the *Corpus de la France médiévale*, to be completed by consulting the *Titulus* publishing platform (URL in bibliography). As the volumes from the *Corpus des inscriptions de la France médiévale* contain entries for inscriptions dated before 1300, this survey dealt mainly with the preliminary inventory for this publication, which contains entries for the inscriptions preserved or known of for the entire medieval period up until approximately 1500. For Germany and Austria, see the excellent website *Deutsche Inschriften Online* (URL in bibliography).

14 For the major epigraphic movements of late antiquity and the decrease in the number of texts available, see Bolle et al. (2017).

15 For the linguistic upheavals in epigraphy, mainly in France, see the definitive overview by Ingrand-Varenne (2017).

16 Regarding this subject, see the collection of papers in the volume by Martín López & García Lobo (2010); see also Favreau (2006).

articulations in the graphic types employed: the revival of the epigraphic capital inherited from Roman antiquity and reinterpreted in the Carolingian Empire; the more sustained use of the so-called “uncial” or “Gothic” scripts that abandon the square capital model from the 1100s onwards; and above all, the appearance of minuscule script in medieval inscriptions.

This last phenomenon is sufficiently important, even radical enough, that it can be considered, at least, as a hypothesis, a “change” in the epigraphic practices of the Medieval West and perhaps beyond. This is by no means a discovery, and some studies have already considered the issue of minuscule script in medieval inscriptions;¹⁷ however, most work seems to have focused on the qualitative perspective mentioned above, considering it subordinate to manuscript writing, and in comparison to other graphic forms, without “qualifying” this epigraphic minuscule script and what it represents in the practice of public writing. The following pages propose some theoretical paths of reflection on this subject rather than an attempt to explain the epigraphic change that constituted the adoption of minuscule script in medieval inscriptions at the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. This study is by no means definitive and raises more methodological or anthropological questions than answers regarding history or palaeography.¹⁸ For this attempt, the script of inscriptions in the Latin West will be described first, mainly in the area of today’s France, Spain, and Germany (for which the most significant documentation is available), through a partial study that focuses on a corpus of approximately 3,000 inscriptions, which unfortunately does not suffice for establishing anything more than a sometimes impressionistic panorama of the palaeographic situation applied to inscriptions. Secondly, we will see how epigraphic research has addressed this question with a historiographical study of the notions of evolution and quality. Finally, some proposals are put forward shedding light on the graphic context that permitted the (almost) sudden use of minuscule script in inscriptions by invoking the “fashion” phenomenon before returning in conclusion to the heuristic tool of quality and its application to medieval written practices outside the realm of manuscript writing.

¹⁷ The use of minuscule script is seen as representing a break in the epigraphic chronology established by Koch (1969)

¹⁸ This chapter in essence resumes the presentation given in Stockholm in August 2022; research had then been established for the examination of the geographic areas covered by the published volumes of the *Corpus des inscriptions de la France médiévale*, with the volumes available online from the *Deutsche Inschriften* collection, and the published volumes from the Spanish and Italian collections.

Epigraphic Writing: “Models” and “Evolution”

The variety of medieval epigraphy is evident everywhere and at all times; it is much more likely to find inscriptions that do not resemble each other than to discover strong similarities between multiple epigraphic objects. These similarities relate to three main aspects: 1) the text’s disposition and support. We can take the example of texts on gothic stained-glass windows,¹⁹ or funerary inscriptions engraved on the surface of effigial slabs beginning in the 1220s across the entire Atlantic seaboard of Europe, which form genuine groups;²⁰ 2) the formulary content of the text which, in Latin or the vernacular, utilises a recurrent vocabulary, structure, or prosodic form²¹. This is the case with epitaphs introduced by the expression *hic jacet*, or texts mentioning the consecration of a church;²² 3) the type of script used to write the text, which is identified as the graphic “quality” of the inscription. The use of Roman capitals in Carolingian inscriptions (Figure 1) or the use of very ornate letters in thirteenth-century epitaphs in the city of Vienne in the Rhône valley (Figure 2) make these inscriptions “look the same”.²³



Figure 1: Tours, Saint-Martin, funerary inscription for *Adalberga* (830 or 840). Photo: © CESC/M/CIFM J.-P. Brouard.



Figure 2: Vienne, Saint-André-le-Bas, funerary inscription for *Petronilla* (1216). Photo: © CESC/M/CIFM J. Michaud.

Taken separately, these similarities are so widespread in epigraphic documentation that they likely represent the very structure of the practice. By this we mean that the choice and repetition of a given disposition, formulary, and graphic type define medieval epigraphic writing which, to satisfy the variable communicative requirements,

¹⁹ The great sets of stained-glass windows at Chartres and Bourges constitute a very interesting cluster for analysing painted script because their use in the cathedral spans the entire period during which epigraphic minuscule script appeared and then became rare. Unfortunately, we still lack studies providing a general overview of these inscriptions. See, however, *Corpus des inscriptions de la France médiévale, Tome 26: Département du Cher*, Paris, 2016, entries 14 to 63 for an initial approach.

²⁰ On this subject, see Paul Cockerham’s wonderful recent book (2022).

²¹ The question of epigraphic formularies has been addressed on numerous occasions by Robert Favreau using concrete cases; see in particular Favreau (1989b, 1991a, 1991b).

²² Ingrand-Varenne (2010). For another epigraphic formula, see Mineo (2015).

²³ For a very innovative interpretation of these palaeographic periods, see Deschamps (1929).

constantly manipulates and transforms these three aspects of inscriptions (disposition, content, script). The differences between one inscription and another are due to the arrangement of these three elements and the perpetual reshaping of their relationship. The documentation would thus be less affected by structural change than it would always show fluctuating assemblies of these three elementary particles of epigraphic construction.

On occasion, significant similarities can be observed between one text and another or a group of inscriptions and another, the number of similar objects sometimes leading to the identification of true clusters generally defined by their superficial resemblance and their accumulation in the same place rather than by any detailed analysis of formal convergence points. The gigantic stone obituary preserved in the cloister of Roda de Isábena in Aragon represents the paradigm of such epigraphic groups.²⁴ Great similarities can be found in the disposition, content, and written form of the inscriptions gathered within the same architectural space (Figure 3); however, a thorough study of written forms and techniques reveals profound variations that can be linked to the very epigraphic program, the religious and temporal intentions of Roda's canon community, the site's institutional upheavals, the liturgical commemoration of the



Figure 3: Roda de Isábena, Cathedral Saint Vincent, cloister, funerary inscriptions for canons (13thc.).
Photo: © Vincent Debiais.

²⁴ For the cloister of Roda and its inscriptions, see Gudiol (1967), and more recently Grégor & Uberti (2022).

dead, etc. In this group, which is not dated by any indication in the texts themselves, the palaeographic variations were not considered until very recently, and only for establishing a chronology of inscriptions and for stating, from the evolution of forms (very difficult to detect, moreover), the passage of time, the succession of artisans, and a hierarchy between a so-called “master” and his successors (Martín López 2020).

This evolutionary reading of inscriptions, which prefers the safety provided by the concepts of maturation, apogee, and decline to the complex vagaries of history,²⁵ is based on the observation of the main chronological modifications during the Middle Ages of the third elementary particle, the script, which are summarised here in an excessively schematic manner for the Latin West.²⁶ Before the beginning of the ninth century, epigraphic practices were in line with the late-antique use of public writing, with a limited number of texts produced especially for important funerary displays, urban sites, and objects of distinction (Velázquez Soriano 2014). The written forms employed in these inscriptions were defined by an immense variety of techniques and dispositions, sometimes within the same graphic object, but particularly between one place and another. Most of the time, writing used the capital script or at least a bilinear graphic type (i.e., of a single height divided between two lines) (Stirnemann & Smith 2007), which evokes the use of antique and late-antique epigraphy except for specific epigraphic uses, such as accounts written on slate in the Iberian Peninsula, for which cursive script was adopted. By examining Edmont Le Blanc’s collection (1892) and some volumes from *Recueil des inscriptions chrétiennes de la Gaule*²⁷, and based on publications for which a reproduction of the inscription by means of photography, rubbing, or drawing is available – in total approximately 350 epigraphic objects – we notice that for texts prior to the eighth century, a third of the inscriptions use an epigraphic capital inspired by the antique period and provide a completely classical aspect. Another third use a “rustic” capital outside of any formal nomenclature, as described by Jean Mallon (1952), with modifications in the module and organisation of the strokes. Finally, the last third used a written form mixing capital and other, very diverse forms. At the beginning of the ninth century and with the Carolingian reform of writing, the number of preserved inscriptions rises sharply throughout Europe, mainly in imperial territories and around the great centres of secular and ecclesiastical power. Within this environment, epigraphic writing gradually adopted the “epigraphic” capital script, thus re-establishing the principle of a solemn written

²⁵ On the false sense of security provided by these notions, see the classic work by Chaunu (1981).

²⁶ For an overview of this secular transformation of writing, see Favreau (1995: 57–89). For a more in-depth view of this period up to the twelfth century, see Koch (2007).

²⁷ *Recueil des inscriptions chrétiennes de la Gaule antérieures à la Renaissance carolingienne*, Paris, 197, 3 vols.

form for inscriptions and “monumental” sections of books²⁸. The Carolingian renaissance thus provided epigraphy with a distinctive script situated high in the hierarchy of the contemporary graphic system. This use would, however, not become systematic; in the volume published by Cécile Treffort (2020) regarding Carolingian inscriptions in western France, it is estimated that 70 percent of the inscriptions dated after 900 use such capital script even if it underwent multiple formal variations, both geographically and chronologically. However, even after being put aside for several centuries up until the contemporary period, the capital remains, to this day, the most widely used graphic form for public writing. Around the year 1000, the inscriptions mainly written in capital letters show a gradual shift towards the use of original forms that renounced the square module in favour of a narrower module in which straight lines are combined with more numerous curves. This is designated in French typology as “uncial”, in the Spanish nomenclature as “Caroline”.²⁹ Eleventh- and twelfth-century writing is thus characterised in inscriptions by this coexistence of different capital types, with written forms, sometimes ornate, and curved letters and module variations that permit the addition or transformation of written strokes (Figure 4).

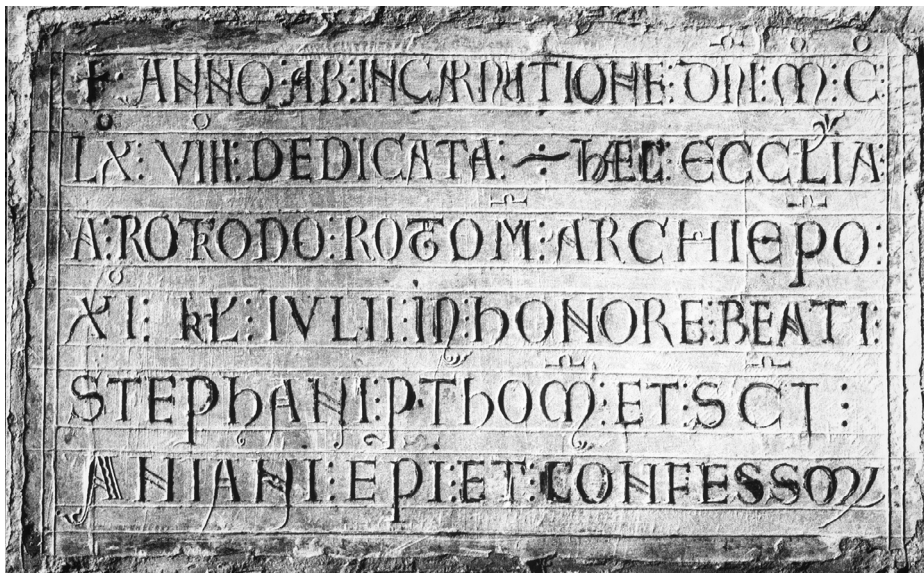


Figure 4: Bures-en-Bray, parish church, inscription of consecration (1168). Photo: © CESC/M/CIFM J.-P. Brouard.

²⁸ On the question of Carolingian writing in inscriptions, see Treffort (2007b); for more specific questions, also see Treffort (2004).

²⁹ For “Caroline” written forms, see in particular García Lobo (2002); see also García Morilla (2018).

From the 1150s onward, the epigraphic square capital favouring straight lines and curves only appeared very occasionally, and the uncial, which was still used in a bilinear system, largely dominated epigraphic production. By around 1450, 80 percent of monumental inscriptions use this type of script, with written forms belonging to pre-humanistic and humanistic scripts. It is within this ocean of bilinear written types, in which a single-height letter is used in very different styles, that we see minuscule script develop; the date is very difficult to establish although this most likely occurred around 1320 (at least in France and Spain). In inscriptions written with capitals, uncials, or Gothic majuscules, we sporadically find some minuscule forms that were, by context, “enlarged”, “stretched out”, or “capitalised” to take their place in the text without needing to break with the principle of a single-height script imposed by the exclusive use of majuscule.³⁰ Furthermore, it is often quite difficult to evaluate whether epigraphic forms may or indeed do belong to the Gothic majuscule system while simultaneously reproducing an enlarged minuscule form. As a letter, minuscule does not constitute in this sense a major change in the practice of epigraphic writing; however, minuscule script as a graphic system – i.e., a script used by multiple authors that allows for the diacritical use of the majuscule (beginning of a sentence, proper nouns, numerals, emphasis, etc.) – drastically changes epigraphic documentation at the beginning of the fourteenth century.

Regardless, it seems difficult to identify true “changes” from one state to another in the written forms of medieval inscriptions insofar as types of scripts are most often porous and open to forms found elsewhere and at other times. The systems are not exclusive; they allow (and even encourage) the use of all graphic types, which contests the undoubtedly absurd or foreign idea of standardisation. On the other hand, it should be remembered that independently of any possible identification of coherent epigraphic groups or the attribution of multiple inscriptions to the same hand, each writing action is a *unicum*, and the identical reproduction of letters in stone, metal, or wood (with the exception of texts produced using a mould) did not exist – this is not, by the way, an epigraphic feature specific to the Middle Ages. The use of a given graphic style is thus always mediated by the gesture behind its creation. This intervention by the human body, as a repository of knowledge and subject to whims and fancies, makes each letter a “singularity” (in the mathematical or more general technological sense of the term): each letter is the chronological and spatial product of the written properties defining the whole to which it belongs. Our palaeographic survey here which might consider minuscule script as an upheaval is thus for the most part groundless, antihistorical, or overwhelmingly broad. Writing is always different from one inscription to the next, and we should probably respect this completely disappointing evidence.

³⁰ See, among others, Banti (2000).

One thing is certain: minuscule script in medieval inscriptions does not seem to be a product of any change or evolution. There can be no *change* because at no time in epigraphic history does minuscule script replace capital or majuscule script, and the Latin West does not shift from a graphic system with a single letter height to writing using multiple letter heights, regardless of the chronological scale considered. The use of the majuscule never stopped at the end of the Middle Ages; on the contrary, it continued to be the most used style for the inscriptions that have been preserved. As an example, we can see that for the inscriptions dating from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries available in the online *Deutsche Inschriften* corpus, 65 percent are written using a bilinear system that excludes the use of minuscule script. The percentage becomes even greater from 1430 onwards. Of the 55 inscriptions dating from the fifteenth century preserved in the town of Passau, only nine texts are inscribed in minuscule; the others use a variable-module Gothic majuscule (Steiniger 2006). Therefore, minuscule script does not force out bilinear types either in the epigraphic material in general or in any group of inscriptions in particular. We thus find epitaphs in capitals, majuscules, and minuscules at the same time and in the same place; stained-glass windows present texts in majuscule and minuscule, etc. Even after the introduction of pre-humanistic and humanistic scripts in inscriptions, majuscule script would continue to be used.

It is also a feature of medieval epigraphy that this unpredictability of graphic choices is never driven by anything other than a circumstantial response to communicative needs. Contrary to what is sometimes found in diplomatic usage, in which certain parts of the text must be copied in a particular written form, where a connection is presupposed between the content of the document and its written form, or between the disposition and the written form, this was never required in the epigraphic practices of the Middle Ages. Such a lack of normativity or constraint in the writing of inscriptions granted these actors immense technical, formal, and aesthetic freedom – we will return to this later. Although it can be difficult to speak of change because there is no substitution, it is even less possible to place the phenomenon of the epigraphic minuscule script into any evolution of the written forms of medieval inscriptions. Indeed, the use of minuscule script does not fit into the evolutionary principle that presumes the emergence of a need or a solution, an adaptation to circumstances through successive mutations, and an end to this process due to success (adoption of the new form and rejection of previous forms) or failure (rejection of the new form, return to the previous form, or emergence of a new solution). The porosity of graphic usage in epigraphy challenges this evolutionary schema that prevents inserting a particular type of letter into a historical context justifying conservatism and invention independently of model and progress. This is exactly what happened with minuscule script, whose use starting in the 1320s owes nothing or next to nothing to the evolution of medieval script, but rather to its relation to the internal circumstances of the objects thus produced.

Minuscule script: between emergence, evolution, and invention

Before analysing these circumstances, let's examine how medieval epigraphy has traditionally viewed the emergence of minuscule script. This will be quite brief insofar as its appearance is considered in historiography as a non-phenomenon. The appearance of minuscule script can certainly be observed since it is part of an inexorable and predetermined "evolution" of graphic forms, coded in their DNA, and not worthy of any particular attention. In this narrative, minuscules were used around 1320 in the same way Gothic majuscule had been used two centuries earlier – and this is hardly an exaggeration.

It should be pointed out beforehand that the use of minuscule script before this date was mostly reserved for epigraphic manifestations of spontaneous writing that are placed under the generic term of "graffiti", even though recent research points to diversity in the intentions and forms of these inscriptions.³¹ In the majority of these cases, they are incised or painted using minuscule, and the graphic style reflects the "cursivity" of a rapid writing gesture mixing the ordinary nature of documentary³² writing with the permanent nature of epigraphic writing. Since graffiti was not systematically included in medieval epigraphy, which never knew quite what to do with these short texts, most of which are difficult to read or date, a great deal of research thus remains to be carried out on this subject. However, it is essential to do so since it allows us to discuss the pertinence of the terms "cursivity" and "spontaneity" to epigraphy, and there is no doubt that this also questions the divergence between graffiti and minuscule script. Were they really written in the same manner in both cases? The issue of materials and technique arises from discussing the very existence of the "ductus", and thus cursivity and "drawn" writing phenomena in graffiti, as we see in inscriptions. Experts will answer these questions that go beyond the issue of "change" in medieval epigraphy; however, they should be mentioned insofar as they reinject a little dose of anthropology into the discussion as a potential path for understanding the minuscule phenomenon in inscriptions from the Middle Ages. Today, we owe both the French and Spanish research teams for addressing this subject, albeit in a very different way. Thanks to the extensive chronological periods covered by the *Deutsche Inschriften*, German epigraphers have been able to concentrate their palaeographic analyses on later, pre-humanistic and humanistic scripts, even if their general reflections on writing, and notably on epigraphic aspects, are essential for the entire medieval period.

³¹ The bibliography on graffiti has been growing exponentially these past few months; here we simply refer to the Graff-IT project (<https://graffitiproject.eu/team/>, accessed 12 July 2024) directed by Carlo Tedeschi that contains the most complete methodological reflections on these matters.

³² I borrow the expression here from Bertrand (2015), who invites one to abandon the use of the adjective "cursive" for medieval writing.

On the Italian side, the opposite phenomenon occurred due also to editorial and documentary reasons, with palaeographic attention turned mainly towards the eleventh and twelfth centuries, a time when minuscule script had not yet intervened as a graphic type in European inscriptions.³³

That Robert Favreau did not devote many pages of his very substantial epigraphic bibliography to the issue of minuscule script is not surprising considering that palaeographic aspects of inscriptions were never really the centre of attention in his research and reflections for the *Corpus des inscriptions de la France médiévale*. In the article written by the Poitiers research team, and awkwardly entitled “*L'évolution de l'écriture épigraphique*”, the question of epigraphic minuscule script is viewed as a connection between the inscriptions at the end of the Middle Ages and the realm of manuscript writing (Debiais et al. 2007). By adopting forms designed to increase the legibility of texts and their frequent consultation, and by following the extensive diffusion of books in medieval society, inscriptions came to use the graphic forms used in manuscripts. The appearance of minuscule script would thus be the epigraphic consequence (or at least the reflection) of the inflationist tendencies of the late-medieval written culture; this understanding reduces, however, the choices and intentions of epigraphic actors who would strictly adopt, in a more or less conscious manner, one of the features of writing at the end of the Middle Ages. To strengthen its hypothesis, the same article points out that this spread also applies to diacritical signs, abbreviations, and punctuation. As for books, minuscule script supposes a more intimate relationship between the text and its reader; it is necessary to get close to the object in order to “read” its content, which explains why the use of the majuscule did not disappear and why it was systematically employed in the great monumental texts exposed in public reading spaces.

The appearance of the minuscule script could thus be linked to the “overflow” on epigraphic material of a particular form that has imposed itself on the production of writing, which was increasing considerably in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Minuscule script, used for its speed, legibility, and robustness in the realm of manuscript writing, would become a kind of *littera franca* to the point of contaminating the epigraphic realm as well.³⁴ The conditions for making inscriptions, particularly on hard materials the surface of which must be altered to shape the letter, defy these three apparent qualities of the minuscule script;³⁵ the eventual revival of this graphic system cannot therefore be linked to any technical “superiority” of minuscules. Use of the Gothic minuscules can even be viewed as a surprising, if not counterintuitive, technical choice. The contagion occurred despite the qualities of the minuscule script,

³³ See, for example, the work of Daniele Ferraiuolo (2022).

³⁴ Because of the pandemic, the notions of contagion and contamination have made a remarkable entry into the fields of Humanities and social sciences, and have been used with great productivity. For this subject, see the collective work *De la contagion*, Paris, 2020; see also Sperber (1996).

³⁵ This is made evident in Thierry Grégor's work (2023).

which likely explains why it never became the *littera franca epigraphica* in the Middle Ages. This is also the reason why a trickle-down explanation is not sufficient.

Robert Favreau proposes two paths to be explored in order to understand this phenomenon. First, he considers that the diffusion of minuscule script through the increasingly numerous texts circulating within all social milieux, in order to carry out the majority of everyday activities, made this graphic type the most widespread script, independent of the readers' level of education and literacy. Therefore, minuscule script would simultaneously become the script par excellence *as well as* the script *par défaut*, and inscriptions would have appropriated this script to ensure effective communication. The explanation is tempting and undoubtedly partially true. However, it converts the use of minuscule script into an indication of the generalised ability to read written types that are "less easy to read than the majuscule", whereas it would be necessary to distinguish the ability to read a text from the familiarity of recognising the letters it uses (Favreau 2006: 12). This familiarity makes it possible to create a link between inscriptions and manuscripts, and to understand epigraphic and manuscript objects within the same written culture; however, the familiarity paradoxically shatters the formal exceptionality and distinctive feature of the inscription, which is likely one of the reasons for its use in the Middle Ages, and which justifies the production of inscriptions regardless of the cost, technical difficulties, legibility conditions, conflicts regarding positioning, etc. The fact that minuscule script could thus dissolve the epigraphic specificities in the mass of written culture is thus another possible explanation for the partial diffusion of this graphic type. The second path to explore according to Robert Favreau is linked to the graphic properties of the minuscule script that make it possible to produce longer epigraphic texts at a time in which inscriptions were becoming longer, particularly in the funerary realm. The material evidence seems to prove him right since minuscule script was being used for long inscriptions listing the dead's administrative or ecclesiastical positions, or making inventories of testamentary provisions, especially in the fifteenth century³⁶. Two difficulties remain, however: first, very long inscriptions in majuscule script and very short inscriptions in minuscules can be found at the same time and in the same place; second, it is impossible to determine whether minuscule script allows longer texts or if the literary trend of embellishing funerary inscriptions provoked, accelerated, or imposed the use of a graphic style that was little used in the epigraphic field.

As usual, Robert Favreau's contributions and insights are of considerable importance, and although they do not entirely explain the minuscule phenomenon, they are greatly merited with exploring this graphic type within the context of a general cultural history of the Middle Ages, and linking it to a particular moment in the production of epigraphic material. Here one recognises the cultural (and not strictly palaeographic) orientation of the research team behind the *Corpus des inscriptions de la France médiévale*.

³⁶ For more on this matter, see Favreau (2017).

The same could also be said of Cécile Treffort's analysis of the epigraphic capital script at the time of the Carolingian renaissance and the writing reform of the eighth and ninth centuries.³⁷ This cultural orientation, which is not found in similar studies in Germany and Italy, and even less in Spain, has two consequences: one positive and the other negative. It makes it possible to analyse inscriptions for themselves and not for what they might say about a possible palaeographic evolution; however, they reduce to anecdotal evidence and incongruity the original inscriptions which cannot find the means of their explanation within the cultural context. One of the inscriptions in minuscules listed in the *Corpus des inscriptions de la France médiévale*, and which can be considered graffiti, is found in the cloister of Monastir-del-Camp, in the commune of Passa in Roussillon province.³⁸ This funerary inscription is made of three elegiac couplets traced in minuscule script inside a ruled compartment. It is dated to 1196, which could correspond to the form of the letters since they are quite distant from the *littera franca*, for which we would have to wait another century and a half. The inscription for Bertrand of Villelongue thus constitutes an anomaly and is succinctly described with the following sentence: "The epitaph is engraved in minuscules, which is done very infrequently in medieval epigraphy"³⁹. It would be fruitful to know more about this anomaly, especially when there is another inscription in Monastir-del-Camp dated 1269 written in Gothic majuscule (Figure 5).

The use of minuscule script would thus be of interest for epigraphy when it breaks away from anecdotal evidence and graffiti, and when it is regarded as a Gothic minuscule that can be approached, compared, and eventually made dependent on manuscript writing. Without exaggerating, one could affirm that this is in line with the research conducted by the Spanish school of medieval epigraphy led by Professor Vicente García Lobo. This school is founded on a strong epistemology and particular understanding of medieval written culture profoundly marked by diplomatics, with numerous contributions notably in the domain of classifying inscriptions. The attention given to palaeography is essential, and the script type is one of the (absolute) criteria for chronologically organising the inscriptions in the *Corpus inscriptionum Hispaniae mediaevalium*.⁴⁰ In addition, changes in the script of inscriptions are always viewed as an evolution of graphic types, an obsolete form being replaced by one more suitable, a modern letter substituting an archaic one.⁴¹ Conversely, the historiographic influence of the realm of books and documents on Spanish epigraphy led to strengthening the dependence between the two graphic systems, the latter being systematically inherited from the former, with manuscript writing anticipating and providing its models to epigraphic writing. In France, where epigraphic research saw inscriptions

³⁷ See, for example, Treffort (2007c).

³⁸ *Corpus des inscriptions de la France médiévale, t. 11: Pyrénées-Orientales*, Paris, 1986, n° 79, p. 999.

³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 98.

⁴⁰ For this palaeographic classification, see García Lobo & Martín López (1995).

⁴¹ For example: García Lobo (2008).



Figure 5: Passa, Monastir-del-Camp, cloister, funerary inscription for *Bertrandus* (1196). Photo: CC-BY licence © Palauenc05.

as subject to cultural influence from the realm of manuscript writing, epigraphic research in Spain sought to identify an incontestable formal influence that led to continuing with a graphic type from one medium to the next, sometimes without any adaptation or technical or material constraints.⁴² We owe María Encarnación Martín López for providing the primary summarisation of this subject, which establishes several important facts. The appearance of minuscule script in Spain in the fourteenth century is being linked to “the influence of the book upon inscriptions”, which borrows the script of the most solemn parts of *codices* to form increasingly longer texts that multiply common diplomatic formulas (Martín López 2017). Although the author does indeed point out that this use, apparently for most inscriptions on the Iberian Peninsula, constitutes an “unprecedented phenomenon in epigraphy”, she offers no real explanation apart from the natural and inexorable contagion of manuscript writing upon the epigraphic realm. If we examine the author’s argument in detail, we note, however, that minuscule script would come from the use of inscriptions from the late Middle Ages of diplomatic, legal, and prescriptive content from documents effectively written in minuscules. However, the particular type of minuscules, *textualis* or *formata*,

⁴² This circulation is particularly noticeable in García Lobo (1999).

would arise as a consequence of the diffusion of books in late medieval society. This distinction seems more difficult to track since it completely evades the technical dimension, which leads, as was recently shown, to favouring straight, not linked lines of minuscules for lapidary materials, and to choosing different types of script according to uses and needs.

The work of María Encarnación Martín López must therefore be supplemented by the research of Natalia Rodríguez Suárez, who confirmed the anteriority of the Gothic minuscules in manuscript writing and thus the influence of books on inscriptions.⁴³ However, she also specifies the chronology by confirming that minuscule script passed first from books to inscriptions that imitated books, then to inscriptions as such. In the initial phase, it was not a question of using a given written form, but rather of imitating the “form” of an object through drawing. In the second phase, it is genuinely a matter of contagion even though it cannot be determined whether this occurred from the book-object, as María Encarnación Martín López suggests, or the book-image, as Francisco Gimeno Blay (1990) puts forth. In any case, it seems that painting, mainly on wood panels (altarpieces and devotional images), constitutes a milestone in the epigraphic use of minuscules. In his recent dissertation, Julio Macián Ferrandis (2023), clearly separating himself from previous contributions made by the Spanish school, provided a detailed analysis of the corpus from the Valencia region and its major painting production from the eighth to the fifteenth centuries. This cluster shows that the minuscule script indeed appeared first in painted books, scrolls, and labels, but the graphic type was not meant to imitate minuscules from manuscript, then printed books. With the development of minuscule script, we witness the diversification of graphic types that correspond less with the intent to imitate than to express a particular style – Italian painters thus used a minuscule common in Italy for both books and inscriptions. Finally, Julio Macián Ferrandis affirms that Valencian paintings contain exclusively epigraphic forms of minuscule script that do not resemble any manuscript form on one hand, and seek to accentuate the artificiality of the ductus on the other, as does the pre-humanistic script found at the same time in inscriptions from the Iberian Peninsula.

The original work on Valencian painting allows us to consider the cultural context as well as the general evolution of palaeography. It also opens the way to research on writing that takes into account the general aesthetics of artistic forms, an aspect that is too often neglected and that invites us to contemplate the relationship between straight lines and curves, letters and design, the emerging role of perspective in the implementation of writing, the function of images and text, etc.⁴⁴ This cultural, visual, and artistic context, both practical and theoretical, of the last two centuries of the Middle Ages, also experienced transformations and changes that perhaps shed

⁴³ See in particular Rodríguez Suárez (2010b).

⁴⁴ On these matters, see Debais (2010).

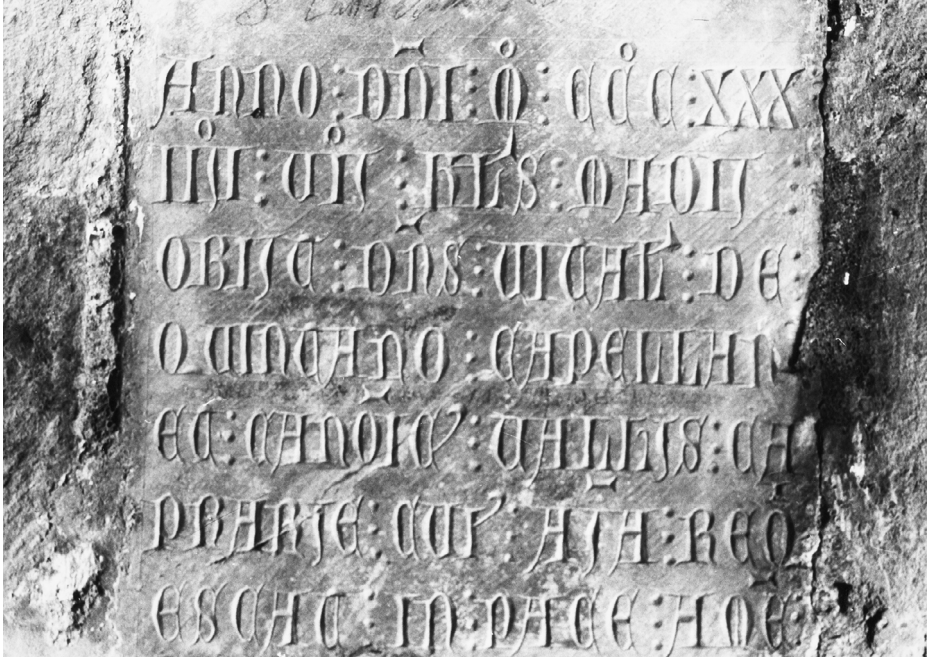


Figure 6: Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges, Cathedral, cloister, funerary inscription for *Vitalis* (1334). Photo: © CESCO/CIFM J. Michaud.

light on the minuscule phenomenon, this phenomenon would in any case be situated within the panorama of the changes in the written culture rather than in the confinement of a palaeographic evolution permanently challenged by the conditions for creating inscriptions and by communicative intentions.

Script, sign, emblem, and image

When questioning the documentary significance of the minuscule script in medieval inscriptions, it becomes less obvious that this graphic turn of events is meaningful for the Middle Ages. Does it truly represent a change in the history of epigraphic writing? It is difficult to reconcile the discrepancy between the anecdote, the anti-phenomenon that is the alteration of graphic habits doomed to perish due to the hegemony of the majuscule, and the revolution of exposed writing that would constitute the adoption of minuscule script, a graphic type that epigraphic practices had so far pushed aside. The reasonable solution for avoiding this insurmountable discrepancy likely consists of excluding minuscule script from any palaeographic evolutionary scheme and to

see whether the use of this graphic type is linked to more *ad hoc* circumstances, thus avoiding any epigraphic generalisation separating the “feature” from the “system”.

One could first consider that the use of minuscule script is a visual means of producing either similarity or distinction; displaying a text in minuscules within a graphic landscape essentially composed of inscriptions in majuscules is to create a rupture, a “figure of transgression”, to use Hubert Damisch’s (1971) words for the medieval image, which excludes the object from the discourse and makes it the focus of attention, dissonant and divergent. However, if minuscule script is indeed employed within a set of texts using the same written form, it is to visually forge a community of writing and associate graphic objects within the same group. This process of distinction and belonging has been documented for the use of the Carolingian capital and for the use of “strange” letter forms at the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern era. In any event, this does not refer to using a given letter type inherited from manuscript writing, but rather creating relationships between inscriptions regardless of whether this relationship is one of similarity or disparity. Such use can be seen in several important epigraphic clusters, such as in the Girona Cathedral complex in Spain, where the use of minuscule script is reserved for creating important “families” of texts concerning deceased persons in particular that belong to the same social group (secular or ecclesiastical dynasties, urban factions).⁴⁵ In these groups, minuscule script is reserved for certain families, whereas first the Gothic majuscule and then the pre-humanistic is used in most of the funerary documentation in Girona. With the stone obituary of the former cathedral of Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges, one sees a different situation (Figure 6): the set of funerary inscriptions, regardless of the date of death or the moment of their creation, uses a very narrow Gothic majuscule, even in the last third of the fourteenth century, a time during which a ductus so narrow was adopted that it becomes practically illegible, as if the lapidaries were avoiding minuscules at all costs⁴⁶. Such conservatism is not linked to the technical or aesthetic inability to inscribe minuscule letters since it is found in other objects within the cathedral; rather, it is due to the desire to graphically strengthen the coherence and consistency of the community, to put up a united front through letters. In some groups of inscriptions now preserved in Germany, in Passau, for example, the opposite phenomenon can be observed; where we would have expected minuscules, particularly widespread in the city in the middle of the fourteenth century, a completely unusual majuscule script was used to extol a particular deceased, minuscule script being reserved for restoring and copying older texts.⁴⁷ In Girona as in Passau, use of minuscule script was intimately linked to the temporal dimension, but in no way to a linear evolution of the graphic types. Uses of minus-

⁴⁵ For the inscriptions in the Girona Cathedral, see Marquès (2009).

⁴⁶ *Corpus des inscriptions de la France médiévale. Tome 8: Ariège, Haute-Garonne, Hautes-Pyrénées, Tarn-et-Garonne*, Paris, 1982, n° 134.

⁴⁷ *DI 67*, Stadt Passau, n° 67 (URL in bibliography).

cule script are the means by which to introduce rhythm into epigraphic documentation, to envisage anachronisms or anticipations.

This play on temporal distortions is only conceivable if minuscule script is indeed endowed – for inscriptions at least – with a chronological singularity and if creators of inscriptions were aware that it was an emerging, breakthrough script. In stone inscriptions, at least between 1350 and the fifteenth century, minuscule script generated an element of graphic surprise and would produce, I would argue, a form of enchantment on those viewing these objects. We must follow here the definition that anthropologist Alfred Gell (1994) gives for *enchantment*, which is the power technical processes have of casting a spell over us, so that we see the real world in enchanted form. In inscriptions, the minuscule's lack of generalisation is not an indication of some failure in the disposition of the script to take its place within an evolutionary scheme of writing – a genetic error which would not have survived its trial period – rather, it is because its non-systematism is the guarantee that the enchantment would last over the long term. It is a script that stands apart and can generate surprise or at least distinguish itself within the panorama of inscriptions in the second half of the Middle Ages.

The surprise effect is undoubtedly not the same for epigraphic objects for which minuscule script is expected to be used; or to express it in a more nuanced way, for which the use of capital script has been and remains less systematic. And it is for these objects that we must attempt to explain why this graphic type was chosen. According to the data collected for this preliminary study, it appears that minuscule script is found mainly in two types of inscriptions. The first type deals with small objects made primarily of metal on which information was incised rather than engraved, and which were possible to be read but not systematically so; it was necessary to purposely take the object in one's hands and look closely in order to locate and decipher the text so as to unlock the inscription's content. This is the case, for example, with the burial crosses placed inside tombs in the High Middle Ages on which texts of absolution indicating the names of the deceased along with prayers intended for the salvation of their souls were written in minuscule and cursive script.⁴⁸ These objects belong to the generic category of endotaphs, but they are distinguished by their content and graphic execution from funerary inscriptions traditionally designated by the word endotaph, which contain briefer texts written in majuscule that mainly identify the deceased (Figure 7).⁴⁹ In a recent article, Morgane Uberti (2018) brilliantly illustrates the temporal implications of these epigraphic objects, alternately exposed and then withdrawn from view, and we can extend these reflections to the absolution crosses which were to be used, at least in a symbolic manner, as part of the liturgy for preparing the body of the deceased and to record the words the priest pronounced on this occasion. The use of minuscule script

⁴⁸ See, for example, the crosses kept at the Musée des Antiquités in Rouen: *Corpus des inscriptions de la France médiévale. Tome 22: Normandie*, Paris, 2002, n° 246 et sq.

⁴⁹ Concerning endotaphs, see Treffort (2016).



Figure 7: Rouen, Musée des Antiquités, funerary cross for Rainaud (12th c.). Photo: © CESC/M/CIFM J.-P. Brouard.

for these objects would have many practical explanations: the need to compress the inscription onto a small cross; the urgency of quickly creating the inscription in the time frame of the ritual or of a person's last moments; or the domestic context in which the object was created, establishing minuscule script as the only one "available" for writers. Even if we know very little about the actual conditions under which these crosses were made and used, these practical reasons must not be rejected. This should not prevent us, however, from considering that these inscriptions are practically the only graphic objects from the Middle Ages that incorporate the content of the voice into the material, and, in this way, its sacramental effectiveness outside of books. The absolution cross is certainly a performative object serving to ensure the enduring effectiveness of the words, but it may be, perhaps above all, the most material liturgical score

produced in the Middle Ages on epigraphic media. When a series of absolution crosses are analysed, we note that the general cursivity that emerges from the writing is the product of quick incisions, and one can feel, in the letter forms, the movement of a hand transcribing the content of words spoken or dictated at the same time, which would be completely impossible or artificial with a majuscule script. As a prudent hypothesis, therefore, we could consider the minuscule a *notational script* the use of which in epigraphic documentation is to make a given written circumstance visible in the material.

The second type of epigraphic object for which the minuscule is used is also of small size and made of metal; in any event, the script is employed in a reduced module. These are reliquaries, particularly inscriptions that identify, sometimes in the shape of a list, the holy remains kept inside the chest or shrine. There are few examples before the middle of the fourteenth century, but a general survey shows that the minuscule appears early and spreads rapidly, to such a degree that these metal objects are epigraphic texts for which majuscule script would not be used when it came back for the writing inscriptions at the end of the Middle Ages. Numerous examples produced in Germany around this date confirm this trend for all the engraving techniques and content types (the inscription regarding the donation, donor's identity, goldsmith's signature, and list of relics). The reliquary of Saint Cordula in the Diocesan Museum in Osnabrück, dated around 1440, shows a long inscription in highly ornate Gothic minuscules at the base of the shrine (Figure 8)⁵⁰. We can still read on the reliquary of St Antoine, which was made at the beginning of the fourteenth century and currently preserved in the Cathedral's treasury in Essen, the name of the saint incised in a smallish minuscule⁵¹. The frequency with which this script is used is even more remarkable since, at the same period, lists of relics painted on wood or engraved in stone, which were produced in monumental form in churches, used Gothic majuscule script, and the humanistic majuscules. As with the absolution crosses, it cannot be excluded that reliquaries were inscribed in this way for practical reasons or to follow the graphic conventions of their time. However, this should not prevent us from formulating a prudent hypothesis postulating that the use of the minuscule on the exterior of reliquaries corresponds to the graphic type used on the inside of the same objects for the *authentiques* (authenticity labels) affixed to the relics to identify them when the shrine is opened.⁵² The use of the same written form was meant to display the coherence of the object and its authenticity, and to enforce materially what was recorded on paper or parchment. If we also consider that the *authentique* was often left legible or at least visible thanks to an openwork device protected by glass or stone, being able to contemplate similar written forms on two com-

50 *DJ* 26, Ville d'Osnabrück, n° 39 (URL in bibliography).

51 *DJ* 81, Stadt Essen, n° 69 (URL in bibliography).

52 For this particular type of written object, see Bertrand (2006).



Figure 8: Osnabrück, Diocesan Museum, Saint Cordula reliquary (1440). Photo: © Deutsche Inschriften.

plementary materials adds to the consistency of the object, which represents a single vessel for the saint's virtue.

In the case of both absolution crosses and reliquaries, the minuscule is not used – or not solely used – in inscriptions either because it represents a contemporary script or because the palaeographic evolution left writers no other choice than to use the written forms imposed on them by the evolution of script types. On the contrary, its use is the result of a graphic decision which enables epigraphic actors to play with the time of inscriptions and frees them from the precise moment of their creation and from the duration of their display. The use of minuscule script is a way to introduce another sense of time in an inscription, to group texts together, to distinguish them from others, to incorporate the temporality of the voice into the object, or to uphold its authenticity. In any event, inscriptions take advantage of minuscule script and transform a graphic type into a sign as if it were a visual construct able to transmit meaning and refer to something located outside the inscription – not to a model that is found at the same time in manuscripts, but to an efficient and shared set of social values that enable the shape of letters to express something beyond what is written in the text.

Now that this point has been established, we can return to wood painting, which serves, according to the important work done by Francisco Gimeno Blay, as a cluster for analysing the use of minuscule script in the epigraphic realm. It is found, in fact, at a very early date in depictions of books and banners held by figures (Christ, apostles, prophets), at a time when frescoes or other depictions in wood paintings still mostly used the Gothic majuscule. These first minuscule scripts adopted extremely diverse forms that are for the most part impossible to “qualify”, often preferring a graceless imitation of verticality and separation of lines found in manuscripts. This thus deals with introducing a feature of minuscule script into the image to produce what one could call a “*writing effect*”. Painters chose to use minuscule script not because they wanted to imitate “real” books possessing contemporary palaeographic and codicological characteristics – painting represented a conjunction of times rather than a perfect reflection of a given era – but rather because they were seeking above all to display writing as a phenomenon shared between the painter, the work, and the audience. The choice of the minuscule, of the red initial, the positioning of a column, or the presence of superfluous rulings was the same whether for use in an altarpiece or in books used in the same period for displaying funerary inscriptions. There is no imitation, but rather a summoning of the whole by the one, a reference to the idea of writing itself rather than to any specific form. Once it is used in the painting for portraying an object as an image, minuscule script imposes itself because of its way of being a sign; this is why other inscriptions in altarpieces, for example, that provide the name of the painter or the patron, or invite one to pray for the painted figures, are not written in minuscule script but in another written form in order to show two different “places” in the image. Minuscule script is the sign; majuscule script is the message. Since it must be fully incorporated into the discourse of the image, it must not resemble the writing of other inscriptions; this is why it must be displayed as an emblem of manuscript writing, sign of the voice (books and scrolls bear words spoken in the image) and the performative effectiveness of the content. This is also the reason why, towards 1450, minuscule script would be abandoned in painting, when painters decided to go back to very ornate minuscule forms then being used in inscriptions, once again making way for the capitals of the pre-humanistic and humanistic scripts, which would be used for preserving the writing effect in paintings.

The use of minuscule script in paintings and elsewhere in epigraphy thus has nothing to do with any transition from manuscript forms to inscriptions, but rather with the convocation of certain properties of medieval writing which, at a given moment, served the purpose of creating inscriptions. Minuscule script is not the product of any sudden appearance of a new graphic type within the writing of inscriptions, but rather the visual sign marking the principle of writing itself at a time when minuscule script was widespread thanks to the change in density, quantity, and recurrence of graphic practices. This is the reason why it was taken up when this principle served the epigraphic discourse; it is the reason why its use disappeared, not due to the inevitable process of palaeographic evolution, but because other forms were

adopted to convey this “emblem” principle. The use of minuscule script in epigraphy does not constitute, therefore, a change in medieval writing practices; rather it is an *ad-hoc* indication, limited in its diffusion, of the fluctuations to which the graphic facts and structures of the Middle Ages were subject. It is also remarkable that minuscule script persisted in inscriptions in its “Gothic” form, meaning the form used at the very beginning, well after the appearance of the humanistic scripts in France up to the 1580s, and in Germany until the end of the sixteenth century.

The fashion system

The distinction between the “feature”, which is a particular quality of a phenomenon or an object, and the “structure”, which is the set of features that are expressed in a set of objects, applies quite appropriately to the use of the epigraphic minuscule script, with inscriptions seeking to either employ the structure so that the object signifies everything – as in the case of the Girona inscriptions – or to make use of one feature only so that the writing calls attention to or refers to something else – as in the case of reliquaries or paintings. From these two notions, one could say that medieval epigraphy did not use minuscule script as it had previously used the capital or Gothic majuscules. It conveyed either certain features of this graphic type or used its structure in a global, even impressionistic, manner. It is thus necessary to broadly return to the fact that minuscule script perhaps constitutes a change, an upheaval, or a revolution in epigraphic history. This is an important phenomenon for what it says about the ability of inscriptions to choose the way to create and transmit their messages; all aspects count, and the choice of the written form is never based on chance or a particular skill available for use only as a last resort. Regardless, I would readily exclude this graphic phenomenon from any notion of how the writing of inscriptions evolved to make it an *ad hoc* means of introducing certain qualities into inscriptions, certain “features” of medieval writing in general.

The distinction between feature and structure is due to Roland Barthes who, in his *The Fashion System* (1967), draws a distinction between a specific element relating to the whole (the fold to a dress, the button to a jacket, the dress to a collection, the jacket to the catalogue) and the general structure of the ensemble of clothing that creates a framework and defines how the consumer belongs to the system. The analogy is certainly forced, but it has the advantage of preferring a complex notion of fashion (as evoked by Roland Barthes), to simpler notions incapable of demonstrating any change or evolution in medieval inscriptions. The social aspects of recognition and distinction represented by clothing, and the general style of a generation or group are indeed those that show that epigraphic writing, through its goal to achieve permanence, sought to redefine its topical nature and anchoring within the practices of the group. The use of minuscule script for certain inscriptions, specifically between 1320

and 1500, is indeed a fashion phenomenon if we comprehend fashion within the anthropological signification of shaping group and individual.

All research performed today on the palaeography of inscriptions in Europe is limited by its access to epigraphic collections, and it is extremely difficult to provide analyses based on reliable accounts, statistics, and data. Even though we could limit our approach to a dated, localised, and identified set of inscriptions to evaluate graphic behaviour (in Girona, Passau, or Roda), the representative nature of these phenomena must be assessed if considered on a supranational scale. Furthermore, the variations between one object and another are sometimes too notable to group them into the same graphic type so that the use of the letter can be assigned a global meaning. This is an acknowledgement of failure, or at least of a limit, that Meyer Schapiro (1930) has already highlighted in his review of Paul Deschamp's work; it is also what the research team of the *Corpus des inscriptions de la France médiévale* concluded in their synthesis article. This is undoubtedly what must be retained from the survey proposed here, which can only work with general impressions and overall views, and not with the documentary precision required to analyse the cultural phenomena of the Middle Ages. The investigation, which nevertheless covers slightly more than 3,000 inscriptions, must be limited to a few theoretical notes on epigraphic minuscule script with the hope that more precise analyses on more reduced sets or specific objects can confirm or contradict the fact that the use of minuscule script in inscriptions of the Latin West is the product of a series of communication-based decisions, rather than the natural consequence of palaeographic evolution.

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