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Available online: 17 Oct 2011

To cite this article: Ittai Weinryb (2011): The inscribed image: negotiating sculpture on the coast of the Adriatic Sea, Word & Image, 27:3, 322-333
To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02666286.2011.541133

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The inscribed image: negotiating sculpture on the coast of the Adriatic Sea

ITTAI WEINRYB

On the morning of 8 December, 1100, an unoccupied boat reached the Adriatic shore near the city of Ravenna. On the boat, so the legend informs us, was only one object: a relief icon of the Virgin in an orant posture, bearing only the abbreviations of her title as the Mother of God (figure 1). The sculpted icon bore no further inscriptions, nor any text that might indicate the circumstances behind its making.1

Like other objects washing up from the sea, the orant of Ravenna represented otherworldly forms. At the very least, it was perceived as presenting a form foreign to its place of arrival.2 Its having come without concrete circumstances to narrate and, in many ways, to decipher may very well have contributed to its mystique as an object that was alien to the environment in which it was installed.3

The Ravenna orant forms part of a larger group of works that produced a similar otherworldly awe and that scholarship has labeled Byzantine relief icons. They appear on the coast of the Adriatic, from Caorle in the north to Messina in Sicily. Although fragmented, their survival indicates a more extensive phenomenon of monumental Byzantine sculpture on the Adriatic coast. In many cases, these relief icons were installed on the exterior of churches, but were not part of a large decorative program.4

Ever since Reinhold Lange published his works on Byzantine sculpture, which cataloged some of the surviving relief icons, their origins and the circumstances of their making have been at the center of scholarly debate.5 Scholars have distinguished between Venetian relief icons, especially those installed on the exterior of the church of San Marco, and the relief icons scattered along the Adriatic coast. Masters of stylistic analysis, such as Otto Demus, dealt with the problems of the dating and provenance of these icons through extensive sets of comparisons. Until now, however, no definitive study of the making and installation of the relief icons on the Adriatic coast has been undertaken. Some claim that they arrived as part of the loot of the Fourth Crusade of 1204.6 Others see the icons as objects made in Constantinople in the late thirteenth century and later sent from Constantinople to Italy.7 Yet another school of thought declares these icons were carved in Italy and suggests dates spanning from the later eleventh century to the late thirteenth.8 Reliefs like the one of St. Demetrios located on the façade of San Marco present such high-quality carving that it is extremely hard to affiliate it with other works originating in Constantinople, thus strengthening the possibility that it was carved in Italy, perhaps even in Venice itself. It must be noted, however, that the entire debate concerning the provenance and dating of the relief icons has been conducted by scholars of Byzantine art who avoid looking into the development of sculpture in twelfth-century Italy.9

Only in the 1928 dissertation of Trude Krautheimer-Hess, which deals with the development of Romanesque sculpture in eastern Lombardy, does one find a strong and convincing argument for the influence of Byzantine sculpture on works of early Romanesque sculpture bordering the shores of the Adriatic.10 For example, Krautheimer-Hess suggests that the carving of the folds in the lower front part of the dress worn by the Virgin by Niccolò on the portal of the Cathedral of Ferrara bears a resemblance to that of the Ravenna orant. Similar folds, as well as the carving of features such as the round and clear face of the Virgin, can also be found in another work signed by Niccolò on the tympanum of the Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta in Verona (figure 2).11 Unfortunately, the work of Krautheimer-Hess has been completely overlooked by Byzantinists working on the question of the relief icons. This article will follow Krautheimer-Hess’s argument to the effect that the Byzantine relief icons, or at least some of them, were carved in the late eleventh or early twelfth century — before the development of the sculpture of Niccolò. Its goal, however, is neither to date the relief icons nor to determine how and to what extent they represent early precursors to the Romanesque sculpture of Niccolò, but rather to focus on the interaction between these two types of sculptural expression along the Adriatic coast.

Apart from both being carved out of a single stone, the basic affinity between the icons and the sculpture of Niccolò lies in their similar place of installation. Many relief icons were incorporated into the façades of churches.12 A striking example can be found in Ancona, where the icon is installed over the threshold to the church of Santa Maria della Piazza (figure 3).13 Similar examples, like the now-lost relief of St. Clement, which was installed above the threshold to a chapel by the same name in the church of San Marco in Venice, testify to the unique nature of these images as Byzantine markers of thresholds. Given that they date to the second half of the eleventh century, they represent pre-Romanesque examples of monumental
sculpture on the exterior of churches. Even if these relief icons were carved in situ and then installed on church façades, they undoubtedly represent a primordial moment of monumental sculpture on the exterior of churches along the Adriatic coast of Italy.14

This group of relief icons shares one further critical aspect: other than the abbreviations marking the name of the sculpted figure, inscriptions were not used as tools to mediate between image and viewer.15 By virtue of their placement on the exterior of the church, however, the relief icons nevertheless became part of the medieval public environment where texts in the form of inscriptions were still the dominant medium. Denuded of text and thus devoid of history, icons such as the orant of Ravenna arrived in a western medieval environment in which public inscriptions — that is to say, inscriptions covering the outside walls of edifices — decorated the civic landscape. These inscriptions functioned not just as bearers of literary content that could be deciphered by an attentive reader, but also as authoritative representations of those texts. As signs, inscriptions also functioned as representational markers of text, that is, as references to the existence of literacy as a form of cultural distinction rather than an embodiment of functioning literacy itself.16

In one of the pioneering studies of the history and function of the public inscription, Armando Petrucci refers to, among others, the inscription on the Cathedral of Salerno which was made in the second half of the eleventh century, around the time when the relief icons appeared on the Adriatic coast. He explains it not just as a return to ancient epigraphic models, but also as a means 'of conveying a political message that was expressed through innovative aesthetic-formal solutions.'17
Petrucci believes that the aesthetic mode specific to public inscriptions has its origins in concepts of invasion — he names the Norman invasion of Italy in 1075–1076 as the beginning of the tradition of medieval public inscriptions — or at least in the interrelations between communities that resulted from the occupation of lands. Taking Petrucci’s thesis as a point of departure, we should consider what effect the appearance of icons such as the Ravenna orant had on the predominantly inscription-centered public environment of the Italian coast. This new form of sculpted image, itself part of a revived medium, must have altered the way in which the public environment was perceived.

The monumental sculpture that developed in response to the arrival of the Byzantine relief icons shares many characteristics with the relief icons. For instance, the tympanum sculpture that developed in the early twelfth century in the Veneto, Emilia Romagna, and the Marche shared aspects of both placement and functionality with the icons. The sculpture of St. Zeno on the tympanum of his eponymous church in Verona offers an example (figure 4). Like the relief icons, it is cut from a single stone. The sculpture of St. Zeno, in keeping with the rest of the Romanesque sculpture from the area of this period, also presents a problematic history in terms of its dating. Although all scholars agree that it was sculpted after the great earthquake of 1117, there is disagreement as to how long after that disaster it was actually made. Some scholars, based on sporadic inscriptions, date it to 1178, whereas others date it earlier, to 1138. A tympanum of the church dedicated to St. George in Argenta, which has several features in common with the Zeno tympanum, is securely dated by an inscription to 1120 (figure 5). The date of the Argenta tympanum pushes the dating of the Zeno closer to the first half of the twelfth century.

The sculpture of St. Zeno belongs to a group of tympana which are ascribed to a sculptor who signed his name as Niccolò. In addition to St. Zeno, Niccolò’s name is also attached to tympanum sculpture at the cathedral of San Giorgio in Ferrara (figure 6) and the Cathedral of Verona. Together with the tympanum at the church of San Giorgio in Argenta, these provide the first instances of tympanum sculpture on the shores of the Adriatic and represent the earliest moments of iconic, non-narrative tympanum sculpture in north-east Italy. The tympana sculptures are linked to the relief icons in that they both present themselves as iconic sculptures and share a similar functionality on the threshold of the holy house. As the icons and the tympanum sculptures also share the same environment on the Adriatic coast, it would be useful to try to look at the tympana together with the relief icons not as a part of a diachronic historical development of sculpture along lines of stylistic and iconographical argumentation, but rather as corresponding images operating in a defined spatial setting. It is important to reiterate that relief icons such as the orant of Ravenna were objects that, according to legend, entered into the environment of the Adriatic coast. Thus, in this case, the horizontal movement of objects across geographical terrain...
generated an alteration of type and means of image production in the defined geographical environment into which they were imported.

The Adriatic coast, especially its northern stretches, was, at least from the seventh century, an area with a notable Byzantine presence. Since that period, Latin rule over these places had changed hands through endless conquests. By the twelfth century, the presence of Greek settlement was not as strong as it has been and cannot be compared with the continuing Greek presence in the south. As a result, looking into two similar but distinct sculptural forms that share the same environment becomes less a question of political identification than a question of taste. As the Byzantine icons were placed on the thresholds of churches at an earlier date than the Latin tympana, changing taste or theological considerations — at least those concerned with religious problems relating to the manufacture of sculpture in that early stage — are more probable reasons for the creation of the Latinate tympana as competing sculptural objects on the outside of the church.²³

Although the icons and the tympana shared a certain functionality and some stylistic affinities, they diverged insofar as the latter include lengthy inscriptions. In all the Adriatic tympana, the borders of the lunette are typically framed by an inscription that traces the base of the lunette as well as its hemispherical borders. In the San Zeno tympanum, the words circumscribe Zeno and the supporting figures, thus creating a border between the pictorial plane of the tympanum and the rest of the façade. Throughout the corpus of Adriatic tympana, as in the case of St. Zeno, the inscription serves to frame or enclose the sculpted body in the center of the tympanum.

Lengthy inscriptions on church exteriors were traditionally intended to commemorate construction. However, when accompanying sculptures or paintings, inscriptions also served as captions and thus functioned as didactic tools in the narration of and commentary on the images they accompanied. At San Zeno, for example, an inscription on the tower dated to 1049 commemorated construction, and another inscription on the south-east wall, just right of the façade, dated to 1178, recorded the completion of the renovation of the church.²⁴ Yet these inscriptions are more than just passive records of historical facts. By virtue of their monumentality, they also commemorate eternally the foundation of the church in the public environment. Like the monumental image, the monumental inscription serves to revivify past time in a present, communal space.

Inscriptions also participate in the decorative programs of other churches on the Adriatic. Quotations from the Old Testament, as well as captions commenting on specific scenes, create a grid of text that is part of the overall pictorial program of these churches, yet at the same time function in the same sphere in which commemorative inscriptions operated. Rather than being simply on display, therefore, inscriptions accompanying images had a role as an intermediary between the image and the viewer. The role of the accompanying inscription has been traditionally understood as didactic. In other words, their function is understood as being to narrate, explain, and decipher the image. In many cases, these inscriptions are regarded as captions, the function of which was to comment on what was happening in the image, perhaps providing a rationale for the existence of the image itself. Inscriptions could also refer to a historical event, the commemoration of which was the reason for creating the image.²⁵

The exterior of the church — the public sphere where these inscriptions and the early phases of images such as the relief icons appeared — became an experimental site for the development of early twelfth-century art. Not only images, but also texts in the form of inscriptions were rediscovered as bearers of literary content that would be deciphered by the reader, as well as authoritative representations of a text. In the public environment, in the field exterior to the church, monumental words and images constantly refashioned their relations to other media, thus creating reciprocal experience between observer, epigraphy, and image on the outside of the church.

The interrelationship of inscription and image raises multiple issues. Scholars such as Jean-Claude Bonne, M.T. Clanchy, Kirk Ambrose, and Stefano Riccioni have advanced the notion of ‘visual poetics,’ according to which inscriptions deliver a supplementary meaning that is not connoted by their content or their role as text accompanying an image.²⁶ From this point of view, the text and the image constitute two independent visual fields that relate to one another, first and foremost because of their juxtaposition. Text and image are thus combined into a dense visual display that is more than the sum of the meanings of each medium. A certain reception of an image could be derived from understanding the amalgam which the image and inscriptions created together. The ontological question of text and image and their interrelation as a composite is the striking feature in the Adriatic tympana, as well as their main point of departure from the Byzantine relief icons.

The Adriatic tympana group is the earliest example of Italian monumental sculpture to include a circumscribing inscription bordering their lunettes.²⁷ As such, they respond to the uncircumscribed relief icons that appeared along the Adriatic coast.²⁸ They also present, for the first time, life-size sculpted bodies on the exterior of churches. In doing so, the tympana correspond with another primordial example of monumental sculpture on the Adriatic coast: ecclesiastical thrones. Thrones such as that at the Cathedral of San Nicola in Bari (figure 7), traditionally dated to the late eleventh century, are often thought to mark the origins of monumental sculpture in medieval Italy. Other examples include the throne at the Cathedral of San Sabino in Canosa di Puglia (figure 8), dated to the first half of the twelfth century, and the throne at San Clemente in Rome (figure 9), composed of fourth-century spolia. Both the thrones at Bari and Canosa di Puglia are adorned with very minimal figurative sculpture. The thrones’ backrests are circumscribed by inscriptions indicating for whom the throne was made and on what occasion. When a bishop sat enthroned, the inscription circumscribed his very body, creating a textual border. The
The backrest inscriptions were not carved to be read in a normal fashion. Rather, they were positioned more as ornamental banderoles than as easily legible texts. Visually, these inscriptions functioned as ornament encircling the body of the bishop and effectively defining his limits. This definition of limits, which also expresses a certain understanding of space, is especially evident in the throne at San Clemente in Rome. The throne there is carved from a fourth-century tombstone; the word *Martyr* is still visible from its previous use. The throne was fabricated during the so-called restoration of Rome in the twelfth century, and though it was composed of a piece of spolia, its makers considered it necessary to add the circumscribing inscription. Thus, for the fourth-century tombstone to operate as a twelfth-century ecclesiastical throne, it was deemed necessary to add a circumscribing inscription that would frame the body of the seated bishop. The backrest of another twelfth-century throne, this one in San Pietro di Castello, the erstwhile Cathedral of Venice (figure 10), was fashioned from an Islamic tombstone. Arabic script proceeds around the semicircular edges of the backrest, and would have thus framed the seated bishop with an Arabic text, once again highlighting his borders. In sum, the trend of furnishing the backrests of thrones with a circumscribing inscription that borders the seated bishop corresponds with the concurrent tendency to circumscribe the sculpted bodies of bishops.
displayed on the tympana of churches along the Adriatic. In the initial encounter between viewer and inscription, the letters would appear first and foremost as a visual marker, functioning as border and frame, and only secondarily as a bearer of literary content. Such semicircular inscriptions have an ancient pedigree and a persistent function that further articulates the meaning behind the circumscribed sculpted figures on the tympana and the seated bishop on the throne. Bordering or delimiting the space occupied by the body has a long tradition that extends to pre-Christian Roman roots. The *imago clipeata*, the iconic image of a ruler, was originally painted on round shields, thus creating an image of the ruler enclosed in a circle. The portrait of the ruler enclosed in a roundel became part of the imperial cult and often served as an apotropaic device. Circular frames were also standard in representations of the dead in late Roman culture. The rich dual meaning of the circumscribed image — as a protective device of the ruler or as a commemorative frame for the deceased — was appropriated by Christian art and employed throughout the Middle Ages. In Christian contexts, the circular frame most often connoted the divine nature of the God who had ascended into the heavens, whom the frame actively separates from the terrestrial world.

Defining the limits is a process in which the circumscribed person, for instance, the bishop on the throne, is made contiguous with borders external to his own body. The question of selfhood and its so-called rise in the twelfth century is a much debated issue. Colin Morris has dealt with the notion, showing how the humanism considered characteristic of the Renaissance existed already in the twelfth century. He argues that self in the modern sense of the word, as a reciprocal process of self-fashioning, was actually a medieval invention. In the controversy that followed the publication of Morris’s book, medieval scholars discovered that in the twelfth century self meant something different from what it means in modern times. In a path-breaking article on the self, Caroline Walker Bynum explained that the twelfth-century discovery of the self was actually a discovery of group identity (and thus one’s ability to elect an affiliation with a group) rather than the realization of modern individuality. Jean-Claude Schmitt, Bernard McGinn, and Jérôme Baschet all demonstrated that the so-called discovery of the self actually meant the rise of interest in anthropology and in the other, by which the definition of a group selfhood could be generated.

According to these scholars, the classical definitions of medieval self changed in the twelfth century into a category that permitted groups to define themselves and the environments in which they were situated. In her study of the relation between the self and space in the twelfth century, Sarah Spence observed: ‘Space and the body (the self) had come to assume preeminence denied them in the early Middle Ages.’ For Spence, a body could also mean the corpus of a political organism. Just as an individual corporeal body operates in space, so too the metaphorical body of society operates within a specific setting. Inscriptions that border thrones or sculptures limit the body, whether human or sculpted, and define the space that remains exterior to the inscription. In the moment of the rise of iconic sculpture on the thresholds of churches and the construction of ecclesiastical thrones celebrating the foundation of these churches, the articulation of a particular communal self embodied by the public figure of the bishop or the sculpted body of the saint could very well represent a self-conscious counter to other types of images made in the same medium, such as relief icons. In any case, it is significant that the notion of the self, either as part of a group identity or as involved in a process of anthropological investigation of ‘others’ to arrive at a definition of the self, coincided with the rise of the public image and the public inscription.

Thus far, I have avoided reading the circumscribing inscriptions found on the tympana. Reading these inscriptions, however, only further clarifies their function. Indeed, moving into the interpretation of each of the inscriptions in the group illuminates how the function of these circumscribing inscriptions extends beyond their pictorial use as a bordering ornamental device or a mere ‘word displayed.’ The exterior inscription
on the San Zeno tympanum reads: ‘Let us praise Niccolò, the skilled craftsman who sculpted this; and let us beg the Lord Christ to grant him the Kingdom of Heaven above.’\textsuperscript{38} The semicircular inscriptions around the other Niccolò tympana denote the same idea. For instance, on the main tympanum of the Cathedral of Ferrara, above the sculpture of St. George fighting the dragon, the inscription reads: ‘May the peoples coming to visit this place forever praise Niccolò, the skilled craftsman who sculpted this.’\textsuperscript{39} At the Cathedral of Verona, the inscription circumscribing the Adoration of the Magi and the Annunciation to the Shepherds reads: ‘Here the Lord, the great lion, is seen as a lamb.’\textsuperscript{40} The viewer who raises his or her gaze sees in a roundel above the tympanum a figure of Christ as a lamb and immediately above it an inscription that proceeds across the entire width of the porch: ‘The peoples coming to visit forever praise him — Niccolò, the skilled craftsman who sculpted this.’\textsuperscript{41} Here, the inscription celebrating the work of the artist borders, so to speak, not just the tympanum itself but also the eight sculpted figures of Old Testament prophets and the hero Roland that flank the door of the church to both sides and may explain why the inscription not only proceeds around the tympanum but, in a sense, circumscribes the entire porch.

The final example of the group of Adriatic tympana is found at the church of San Giorgio in Argenta. The small-sized church, which dates back to late antiquity, is found on the road leading from Ravenna to Ferrara, in the heart of the Marche. During renovations in the first half of the twelfth century, it was decorated with one of the earliest sculpted tympana of Romanesque Italy. The tympanum, dated to 1120, represents, to my knowledge, the first depiction of the martyrdom of St. George in the Latin West and is preceded by only a few representations of this scene in Byzantine manuscripts and frescos.\textsuperscript{42} This early image, located almost on the shores of the Adriatic, where the Ravenna orant was said to have arrived, depicts George tied on his back to the wheel with two flanking figures. The tympanum’s lunette is framed by an inscription that runs around its border then proceeds, in two different tiers, along the lower part of the tympanum.

In its iconography, this portrayal of the martyrdom of St. George generally follows a depiction of Ixion, the king of the Lapiths, in his moment of death, a subject which could only be found as sculpture in surviving relief fragments at the Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta in Torcello (figure 11), dated to about 1100.\textsuperscript{43} Like the orant of Ravenna, the otherworldly Byzantine sculpture of Ixion as presented in Torcello influenced the appearance of the new Romanesque sculpture at Argenta, while the addition of a circumscribing inscription delimited the image of the martyrdom. The inscription on the lunette of San Giorgio reads: ‘The man spurned the wheel which broke him in all his limbs and which gave life to the man to whom it thought it was giving death.’\textsuperscript{44} On the lower part of the architrave we find the words: ‘These shining things sculpted by John of Modigliana gleam. Those who see these let them beg for him with a daily prayer.’\textsuperscript{45} The iconography of the martyrdom of St. George adapted from the scene of the death of Ixion was framed by an inscription celebrating the maker, John of Modigliana. John of Modigliana is the initiator and the person operating both media (sculpture and epigraphy) together in the creation of a new type of agency.\textsuperscript{46} Argenta thus presents a conglomerate of artistic moments condensed into the single pictorial plane of the tympanum: a first depiction of the martyrdom of a saint, an adaptation of otherworldly Byzantine sculpture portraying a scene from classical mythology, and an inscription that circumscribes the scene.

As in the Niccolò tympana, the inscription framing the tympanum sculpture at Argenta celebrates the artist’s skills. While the Ravenna orant was a precursor to the Niccolò group in terms of its style, at Argenta the framed image is also a result of horizontal mobility, insofar as the artist adopted not just the style but also the iconography of a Byzantine image itself channeling ancient mythology. The foundational moment of a novel iconographical depiction of St. George is thus also the moment when the image transforms from a borderless Byzantine sculpture depicting Ixion from Greek mythology into an iconic depiction of a saint in his moment of martyrdom.

By virtue of their very inclusion of manufactured stone figures circumscribed by inscriptions, all four tympana — at San Zeno, the Verona Cathedral, the Ferrara Cathedral, and at Argenta — boldly proclaim their origins as man-made, physical objects intended for contemplation, as opposed to relief icons with enigmatic, perhaps even divine, origins. The inscriptions featured on the tympana, of the type traditionally known in the scholarship on Romanesque sculpture as the ‘celebratory inscription,’ belong to a historical trajectory of inscriptions that culminate in the lengthy inscriptions made by Nicola and Giovanni Pisano. Cornelius Clausen has interpreted these inscriptions as expressions of twelfth-century humanism, whereas Albert Diel has
linked them to the aforementioned twelfth-century notion of the 'rise of self.' As Kendall summarized the situation, sculptors like Niccolò were 'urban artisans who were conscious of themselves as autonomous artists and who took the means at their disposal to perpetuate their fame through their art.'

All five inscriptions acknowledge three basic participants in the interaction between the sculpted object and the viewer. There is an understanding, at least by the maker of the inscription, that someone will look at the image and even read the text. The first participant in the interaction between the reader and the inscription is thus the object (referred to as 'this, hee), the second is the act of sculpting (the verb 'to sculpt'), and the third is the viewer who has, in response to his interaction with the object, to react and pray for the salvation of its maker.

Epigraphy, both on account of its esthetic quality as border and its meaning, served a crucial role in the making of public, monumental sculpture in areas of contact like the Adriatic coast. The artist acted as a master mind controlling the sculptural event in which stone and word interacted not for didactic and instructive purposes, but rather to balance and control the opposing medium. The celebratory inscription on the Adriatic tympana was a tool for regimenting the exterior sculpture rather than deciphering and amplifying its representation.

Whereas the relief icons, like that at Ravenna, were by dint of their otherworldliness closer to what we might call living or miraculous images, the early phases of Romanesque sculpture on the Adriatic purported to be nothing other than artifacts made at a specific moment by a human being who begs favor for his creation. The proclamation of temporality — the understanding of past, present, and future as it appears in the inscriptions — identifies the sculpture as nothing more than a man-made object. All five tympana are located in areas that are either in direct contact with or in close proximity to the Adriatic coast. In all five tympana, it is the act of making, not some legend of miraculous creation or arrival from otherworldly domains, that is emphasized by the inscription. To enlarge further on Krautheimer-Hess's study, the horizontal movement of Byzantine sculpture and its installment in churches along the Adriatic coast led to a Romanesque response of circumscribing inscriptions that objectified the sculpted body. At the meeting point of the Italian and Byzantine worlds, against the borderless Byzantine relief sculpture, the word and its letters functioned as a tool to negate the efficacious presence of the image as a cult object and subsequently as a miracle-working object.

When considering what it meant to be the author or maker of a work of early Romanesque sculpture, with respect to relief sculpture in the early twelfth century, it is helpful to think of the author functioning as a mediator between local and otherworldly images. In the assimilation of Byzantine relief sculpture into a western environment generally, as well as in the creation of the Adriatic tympana specifically, the role of the author as mediator between viewer and image was crucial. Furthermore, the artistic energy expressed in these first instances of monumental sculpture must be viewed as an inherently different expression of artistic self: it is crucial that the inscribed statements are not made to glorify the maker but to lessen the value of his creation, to insist on it being an artifact rather than an otherworldly icon or miracle-working image.

When the orant of Ravenna appeared in the Latin West, bearing no inscriptions and following Byzantine traditions of making, it could not have been regarded as anything but a working miraculous or cult image. A sculpted image intended for worship, it possessed three-dimensional qualities similar to other working images, such as the Holy Face of Lucca, the cult of which gained popularity around this time. As opposed to the Holy Face of Lucca, however, the Byzantine relief icons were placed on the exterior of churches, where the Adriatic tympana were operating against them. The circumscribing inscriptions guaranteed that they would be understood as nothing more than mere artifacts on the threshold of the holy house.

At the point where the sea meets the land, and where Byzantium interacts with Latin Europe, media displayed in the public environment, whether inscription or sculpture, conveyed not only ideas regarding the relations between the image and the edifice it represented, but also deeper and more thoughtful ideas about image making. As Willibald Sauerländer argued long ago, the thresholds of churches, with their sculpted tympana, could be compared to modern-day Las Vegas billboard signs. The relief icons on the Adriatic coast, as well as the subsequent Romanesque tympana, were, so to speak, advertising their own church in the public domain. Although the Byzantine relief icons were made according to Byzantine image theory, the western images, with their fear of sculpture as resonating idols, used the artist inscription as a tool to negate the image by proclaiming its presence as a man-made object that does not merit worship.

Geographical orientation played a crucial role in the making of twelfth-century art, especially in relation to epigraphy and monumental sculpture. Public environments where inscriptions and images were consumed and where forms of civic and economical exchange took place responded to the arrival and the horizontal movement (or, in the case of the relief icons, seeming movement) of artifacts across geographical terrain. Around the Mediterranean basin, the movement of objects, and their circumscription or lack thereof by words, was a preliminary moment in the making of monumental sculpture across the Italian peninsula. Within this geographical terrain, the placement of words on the exterior of churches and the existence of epigraphy as part of a visual field that constructs the public environment of the early twelfth century interacted during a dense moment on the coast of the Adriatic. The sculptor's inscription, more than his carvings, offers an acute tool for understanding the dialog between types of communities. In the rise of monumental sculpture, the public inscription functioned as both an image and a mediator, a conveyer that both limited and expanded the image it accompanied — not through patterns of direct visual relations, but rather through a complex referential relationship between epigraphy, maker, and object.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
Sections of this article formed part of my dissertation written under the supervision of Herbert Kessler at Johns Hopkins University. I thank him for his support and encouragement of this project. A version of this article was first presented at a session organized by Jeffrey Hamburger at the Medieval Academy of America’s annual meeting in New Haven, 2010. I thank him for the invitation to participate in the session as well as to publish the article in this special volume of Word & Image. In addition, I thank him for his valuable comments on various drafts of the article. This work also benefited greatly from comments and advice offered by Beate Fricke, Ashley Jones, Richard Leson, and Jannette Vusich. Any residual error, however, remains my own.

NOTES
1 – The orant of Ravenna would have been labeled in Byzantium an icon of the type of the Virgin Blachernitissa. As this article focuses on the presence of this icon in the Latin West, I shall continue to refer to it as the Ravenna orant. On the Ravenna orant at the church of Santa Maria in Porto, see the recent discussion in the exhibition catalog edited by Angela Donati and Giovanni Gentili, Donne: l’immagine dell’orante per Oriente e Occidente (Milan: Electa, 2000), pp. 133–34. See also Reinhold Lange, Die byzantinischen Reliefs (Recklinghausen: Bongers, 1964), p. 51 and Clementina Rizzardi, ‘Il rilievo marzorino e l’immagine della cosiddetta Madonna Greca in Santa Maria in Porto di Ravenna,’ Felix Ravenna 113–4 (1977), pp. 289–310. The most comprehensive bibliography found on the orant is in Charles Davis, Byzantine Relief Icons in Venice and along the Adriatic Coast: Orants and Other Images of the Mother of God (Munich: Fondamenta Arte, 2006), p. 29. Available online at: http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/artikel/volltexte/2007/270 (accessed 11 August 2010).

2 – The arrival of objects in new environments could present possible misinterpretations of the objects, or misconceptions, and both could lead to labeling these objects as foreign to their environment. See, for example, the legends surrounding the arrival of panel painting in Italy or interpretations of objects such as the San Marco Cup: Hans Belting, Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 330–48; Alicia Walker, ‘Meaningful mingling: Classicizing imagery and Iconizing script in a Byzantine bowl,’ The Art Bulletin 110/1 (2008), pp. 32–53; Avinoam Shalem, ‘Hybride und Assemblagen in mittelalterlichen Schatzkammern: neue ästhetische Paradigmen im Hinblick auf die ‘Andersheit’,’ in Le Trésor au Moyen Âge: Discours, pratiques et objets, ed. Lucas Burkart (Firenze: Sismel Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2010), pp. 297–313.

3 – The sea as a generator of artifacts and as a relevant geographical entity in the production and consumption of art has rarely been an avenue of research explored by art historians. Recent calls in this direction, however, can be found in: Hannah Baader, ‘Gisch: zu einer Geschichte des Meeres,’ in Das Meer, der Tisch und die Gegen der Repräsentation, ed. Hannah Baader and Gerhard Wolf (Berlin: Diaphanes Verlag, 2008), pp. 15–40. In the same volume, see also Beate Fricke, ‘Schaumgebraten: zur Topologie der Creatio ex nihilo bei Albrecht Dürer und ihrer Vorgeschichte,’ pp. 41–61 and Alessandro Novà, ‘Kirche, Nation, Individuum: das stürmische Meer als Allegorie, Metapher und Seelenzustand,’ pp. 67–94.


5 – Lange, Die byzantinischen Reliefsfigur.


8 – André Grabar, Sculptures byzantines du Moyen Âge: (XIe — XIf siècles); Lange, Die byzantinischen Reliefs; Belting, ‘Eine Gruppe Konstantinopeler Reliefs aus dem 11. Jh.,’ pp. 263–71; Davis, Byzantine Relief Icons in Venice and along the Adriatic Coast.


16 – Different inscriptions in different languages function to state the presence of specific communities. This happens especially where communities are diverse, as Linda Safran has shown in regard to south Italy; there, she claims, the inscription serves as an expression for the presence of community as much as for rendering information in a language that is coherent to only part of the community. See Linda Safran, Language choice in the medieval Salento: A sociolinguistic approach to Greek and Latin Inscriptions, in Zwischen Polis, Provinz, und Peripherie: Beiträge zur byzantinischen Geschichte und Kultur, ed. Lars M. Hoffmann (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003), pp. 83–82 and ‘Cultures textuelles publiques: Une étude de cas dans le sud de l'Italie,’ Cahiers de civilisation médiévale 52 (2009), pp. 245–63. In regard to distinction as a form of cultural elites, see Pierre Bourdieu, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).


19 – Evelyn Kain used this point to argue for a later dating of the Zeno figure suggesting that the sculpture was inserted last as part of a consecration ceremony; see: ‘An analysis of the marble reliefs on the façade of S. Zeno, Verona,’ pp. 338–74; also The Sculpture of Nicholas and the Development of a North Italian Romanesque Workshop. On the consecration of churches, see generally Éric Palazzo, Liturgie et société au Moyen Âge (Paris: Aubier, 2000), pp. 71–75. The sculpture of Zeno is also the corner stone of the tympanum; ‘corner stone’ is a loaded term in Christian symbolism. Cf. most recently Éric Thunø, ‘Looking at letters: “Living writing” in S. Sabina in Rome,’ Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft 34 (2007), pp. 19–41.


21 – On the history and topography of medieval Ferrara, see Anna Maria Visser Travagli, ed., Ferrara nel Medioevo: topografia storica e archeologica urbana (Casalecchio di Reno: Grafis, 2004).


25 – On the history and topography of medieval Ferrara, see Anna Maria Visser Travagli, ed., Ferrara nel Medioevo: topografia storica e archeologica urbana (Casalecchio di Reno: Grafis, 1993).


27 – In my search I found no Roman precursors to the circumscribing inscription in what could be defined as a public exterior image. By definition, Romanesque art saw its origins in the monumental sculpture of the Roman period. This is not the case with the circumscribing inscription. From the plethora of studies on the relation between Romanesque and Roman sculpture, see recently in regard to Niccolò: Giovanna Valenzano, ‘Uso, riuso, abuso,’ pp. 441–50.


30 – On San Clemente in Rome, see Francesco Gandolfo, ‘Reimpiego di’...


33 – Circumscription in Christian art has a long tradition rich in symbolism. Since the Second Council of Nicaca, when God was identified as ‘uncircumscribable,’ every circumscribed image is by definition not a physical image of the divine. On the complexity of this notion, see the articles in François Boespflug and Nicolas Lossky, eds, Nicie II, 129–195.