

Article

A Mysterious Middle Ages Inscription from Tuscany

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Abstract: At the entrance of some churches of Tuscany (Italy), there is the reproduction of an apparently mysterious inscription. Minimally from XVIII Century, this has induced a debate on its interpretation. This study proposes a hypothesis based on the Latin alphabet used in texts contemporary to the churches where the inscription is reproduced and a meaning of the message coherent with the official religious doctrine.

Keywords: Middle Ages symbolism; Latin inscriptions; Tuscany monuments; Saint Michael; religious epigraphy; inscription decipherment

1. Introduction

This paper is part of a still active debate on the interpretation of a Medieval inscription graved on marble and placed near the entrance door of many churches of the Tuscany region, in central Italy.

The inscription has a particular form, seemingly with an alternance of symbols and letters. This attracted the attention of popular phantasy and has induced the efforts of savants, like the doctor in medicine and naturalist Giovanni Targioni Tozzetti (1712-1783). He describes the mysterious inscription observed on the Duomo of Barga, a village in a valley of the Apennines mountains, in the Lucca province, north of Tuscany (Targioni Tozzetti, 1768). A short extract of his study is reproduced in Figure 1, where he proposes a transcription. It is interesting to note that the reproduction is sometimes different from the real inscription in Figure 2, the first letter after the cross is upside down, as to create a Greek omega. Despite this, he reported translations of many Latin inscriptions. In this case he declares: "I don't comprehend its meaning" (...io non ne intendo il significato, text in the last two lines of Fig.1).

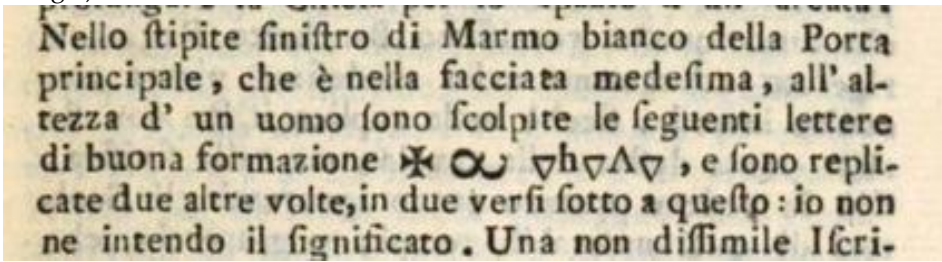


Figure 1. Text from a book of G. Targioni Tozzetti reproducing the mysterious inscription of Barga, (Targioni Tozzetti, 1768, p. 341).

The inscription, represented in Fig.2, is composed of a set of six symbols, repeated three times, separated by crosses with equal arms.



Figure 2. Inscription on the Duomo di Barga, main access. [T. Giannini- Barga 2023]

The version reproduced in Fig. 2 is placed on the external wall of the main entrance of the Duomo of Barga (XII Century). Barga is a small center in province of Lucca, along the Lunigiana valley.

In the same church there is another reproduction, on the left jamb of the door on the right wall of the nave, represented in Figure 3.

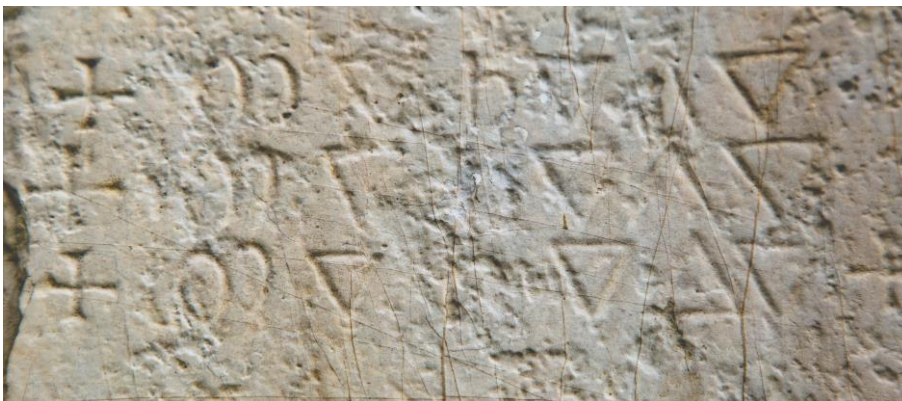


Figure 3. Inscription of the Duomo di Barga, door on the right of the nave [T. Giannini- Barga 2023].

This double presence is an interesting support to understand the role of this artefact: it is strictly related to the door and probably it transmitted a message preparing people to enter a holy place.

There is another version of the inscription, it has all the text in a single line; one example, reproduced in Figure 4, is on the jamb of the main door of the Baptistery of Pisa (XII Century).

In Pisa there is another representation on one side of the door of the San Frediano church (XI-XII Century). This indicates a distribution on building realized in the two centuries cited.

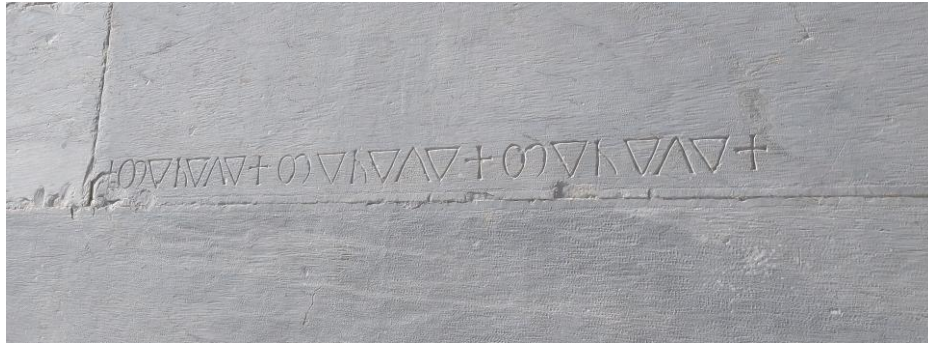


Figure 4. Inscription of the Baptistery of Pisa, main door. [M. Pierantoni- Proloco Barga 2023].

A version in three lines, similar to Barga, can be observed at the National Museum San Matteo in Pisa, graved on a stone that was originally in the church of the Cosma and Damiano Saints, a building now destroyed.

The only documents describing the inscription is on the manuscript no. 896 (folio 63 recto), dating back to 18th Century, from the Biblioteca Governativa di Lucca (Mancini, 1956), "Government Library of Lucca". The document refers the translation of the San Ponziano relics from Rome to Lucca in 901. On the lead box containing the body of the Saint there was a copy of the inscription. Under every segment of the inscription the following words were added: "Immensitas, Unitas, Veritas" ["Boundlessness, Oneness, Truth", three doctrinal references].

The content of the manuscript has generated some doubts about the date of the translation and the name of persons quoted. The facts described have no reference in original documents from Middle Ages. For this reason, the first appearance on the inscription in the X Century has not been a strong evidence.

2. Materials

2.1. Literature review

In the first paper considered the author A. Mancini recognize in the inscription the three letters "M, H and A", that are associated with acronyms of an apotropaic invocation: m(alum) h(inc) a(vertatur) (keep away bad things), or with a magic spell, adopted by some workers involved in the edification of churches in Tuscany, people extremely devoted to the Holy Trinity. Another interpretation proposed is: m(isterium) h(oc) a(moris) [this is a mystery of love] (Mancini, 1956).

The famous epigraphist Guarducci proposes a detailed analysis: she confirms the idea of a text related to the Holy Trinity, in order to keep away the evil presence, but instead of the Latin alphabet, the inscription contains three Greek letters: mu, eta and lambda (Guarducci 1959). With reference to the epigraphic conventions of reduction of names, the text represents the Greek name Μιχαήλ [Micael], in an invocation to San Michele.

Later, in 1975, the author Ottavio Banti proposed the last and more diffused deciphering: the inscription is not in Greek but in Latin alphabet and all the six symbols are characters (Banti, 1975). He reads the name Mihili, a variation introduced by the Longobards of the name San Michele. In his opinion the three triangular symbols are the letter "i", in a particular elaboration of style, and the fifth character, similar to an inverted V, is an "L" in a rare form of the letter "L" from the VI-VII Centuries.

In the same line, Daria Pasini in 2015 concentrates on the historical references: she proposes a detailed analysis of the date of realization of different version of the inscription (Pasini, 2015). The first version was probably realized in the VIII Century in the area of Lucca province; this would justify the asserted archaic form of some letters, suggested by O. Banti.

Other papers on the methodology to decipher this inscription are recently published by F. Perono Cacciafoco (Perono Cacciafoco, 2021) in order to animate a debate that never stopped, and by another author (ElShanawany, 2022) that proposes a new hypothesis of the meaning of the triangular symbols.

2.2. Context

In the inscription there are symbols that are difficult to recognize. It seems that they are archaic letters, or are not letters at all. This poses the question if the inscription was a cryptic message for a group of adepts or a clear message for all devout persons. The reproduction in many copies of the same inscription suggests that it was not an occasional realization, graved by local workers. Its position is always near a church door, at a height of human regard, and well visible. The insertion of an inscription in a religious building is, on a marble slab, a valuable material, probably requested the approval of ecclesiastical authorities, so it had to be related to the Catholic doctrine.

In Tuscany during the XI-XII Centuries, the official religion was Christian Catholic with reference to Rome and the Latin rituals. It was not the Greek rituals of Byzantium, the capital of the Oriental Roman Empire. The language of “clergy” for religious texts and ceremonies was Latin.

Reading and writing capability were abilities almost exclusively limited to clericals and some members of the dominant class, so it was common to transmit religious messages to the population with images, as the frescos inside many churches, or the bas-reliefs on the façade of churches.

It is very important to obtain an estimate of the time of first appearance of the inscription. As seen in the introduction, the document present in the National Museum of Pisa contains dubious references, so the X Century as first representation on a lead box is uncertain. The inscription in a church could be contemporary or successive to the date of building, but in the Middle Ages it was a diffused habit to recover stones taken from previous buildings, so it is not impossible as an origin antecedent.

As in Figure 5, the slab with the inscription from the church of San Frediano is very different from the material of the wall where it is inserted, so it could be an example of reuse.



Figure 5. Inscription from the church of San Frediano, Pisa. [M. Pierantoni- Proloco Barga 2023].

The inscription from the ex-Church of Saint Cosma and Damiano, reproduced in Figure 6, has some very useful details: In the upper part of the stone, there is the inscription and in the lower part a text that describes the realization of the doors of the church. This suggests a contemporary realization of the inscription and of the building.

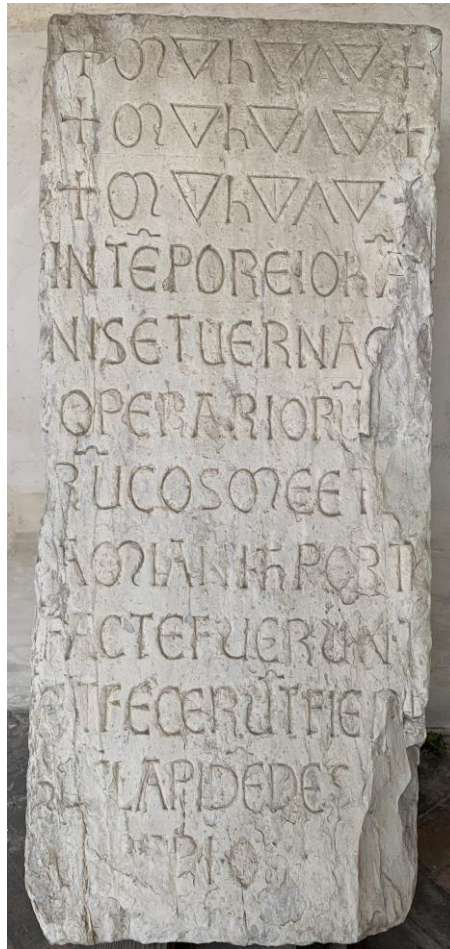


Figure 6. Inscription from the ex-church of Cosma and Damiano, now at the National Museum of Pisa. [M. Pierantoni- Proloco Barga 2023].

The second inscription of the Barga Duomo, in the jamb of a lateral door, is graved on a material so uniform with the remaining wall that it is contemporary or successive to the construction of the church.

There is no lower date for the first appearance of the inscription, but the text was probably diffused in XI-XII Centuries.

The scope of this research is to answer two questions: what alphabets were used and what was the message transmitted by the inscription. A privileged attention is given to contents diffused and the ease of interpretability by the great majority of believers in XI-XII Centuries, possibly renouncing to ad-hoc solutions for the letters adopted.

2.3. Method

Considering the shape, the position and the number of symbols in the Barga inscription, it is probably not composed entirely by letters of the alphabet, with the exception of the assumption of O. Banti. The first effort to identify a letter in every symbol except the crosses has not brought acceptable results, so it is excluded.

The research progresses to identify all possible characters, and the reference is taken from Middle Ages liturgical texts.

The second step consist of obtaining a meaning from the letters, in accordance with the rules of epigraphy and the examples from inscriptions used between the XI and XII Centuries in the Italian Peninsula.

It is useful to summarize some hypothesis considered and accepted:

- A text near the door of a religious building, visible to all the believers, was probably an interesting message, easily comprehensible;
- The characters had to be part of the same alphabet, in the same version; this excludes as low probable a mixt of Latin and Greek letterers, or a mixt of recent and archaic style; both could represent an great obstacle for the readers;
- In a church we expect messages reinforcing the religious traditions, referring to episodes of Holy texts or to figures relevant in the religious hierarchy.

3. Results

3.1. Deciphering

The following analysis consider the group of six symbols reproduced in each line of Figure 2. It does not give attention to the crosses as they are supposed a reference to the church, not alphabetic characters.

An effort to associate letters to the crosses has been done and it has produced no meaningful results.

After comparison of the inscription with a text of XII Century that reproduces the incipit of a paragraph of a religious book of Ugo da San Vittore, in Figure 7, (Hugues de Saint Victor, 1141). It is evident that the first and the third symbol of the Barga inscription correspond accurately to the upper case characters of the Latin uncial alphabet: the M and H letters.

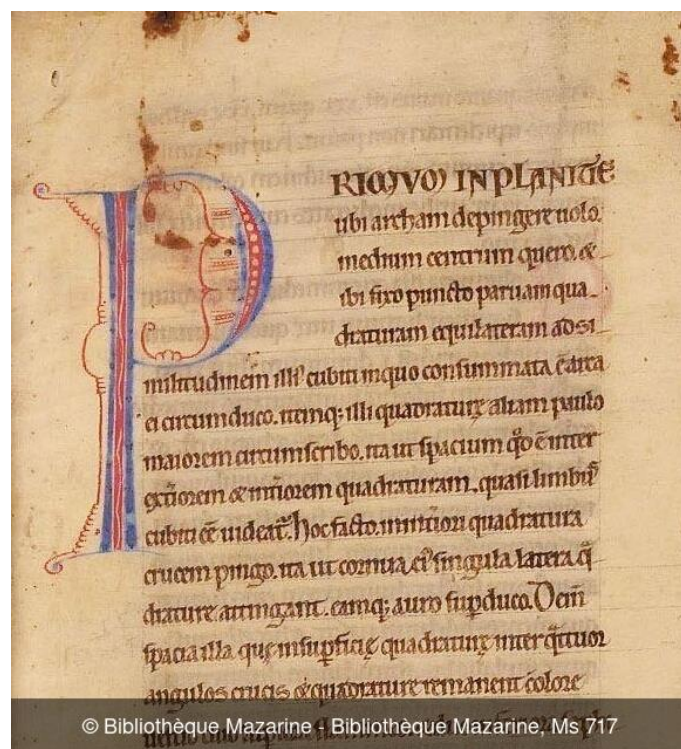


Figure 7. Bibliothèque Mazarine Paris Ms 0717, f 093v; Hugues de Saint Victor, *De vanitate mundi*. XII Century. Text of the title: "Primum in planitie..." (Hugues de Saint Victor, 1141).

The uncial alphabet originally was a twelfth height of a foot size, and it was adopted in manuscripts from III to VIII Century. Later, it was replaced by the Carolingian, but it continued to be applied, for centuries, to write the first character of paragraphs or for titles.

As with the hypothesis of homogeneous alphabet characters, the fifth symbol belongs to the uncial alphabet and is the letter A.

The form of M in the inscription is so particular and it corresponds so much to the uncial version that the hypothesis of Greek alphabet for the inscription become very weak.

It is difficult to accept the interpretation of the third character of the inscription, proposed by Banti, as a rare form of "L" from the VII or VIII Century. All the three letters are considered in normal uncial in use in XII Century. As an additional support, the letter A was reproduced as an inverted V in some coins of the Ostrogoths and the Longobards, as in the solidus of King Sico in Figure 8.

The second, fourth and sixth symbols are triangular forms with a downward vertex; they are probably not letters. Also, in this case a test performed to associate to them a letter was unsuccessful.

The triangles are probably a reference to the number three, as a symbol of the Trinity of God.

3.2. Interpretation of the message

The Barga inscription, as in Figure 2, appears to be a complex mix of letters and symbols, repeated exactly three times: three lines with three repetition of the same group, containing three letters and three triangles. Four crosses are interposed to solidify the evidence of the religious context.

The global inscription could be interpreted as a graphical composition to send a message both to the literate and to the majority of illiterate believers.

The illiterates could easily recognize a composition containing repeated symbols. During the rituals, the clerics probably explained with accuracy the correct meaning of the inscription. This complex group of symbols is particularly able to impress the believers. Today in Pisa a popular belief survives: the three triangles in the inscription are considered marks of the claws of Evil, who is put backward by crosses and by the magic spell contained in the text.

In the inscription there are three alphabet letters "M, H, A" in the form of acronyms, in accord with the epigraphic tradition. However, in the absence of more information, every Latin word beginning with the corresponding characters could be proposed, creating arbitrary possibilities. The solution could be obtained recurring to the religious traditions, as the habit to call for help to intermediary figures, the Saints, diffused in the Catholic tradition.

But an unexpected support arrives from some inscriptions diffused in the early Middle Ages. When books were so rare, another form of writing was diffused in normal life and was intentionally used as an instrument of propaganda for political and religious ideas: The coin inscriptions.

After the deposition of the last Emperor of the West, in the end of the V Century, in the Italian peninsula there is a diffusion of coins minted by new rulers, before Ostrogoths kings, later Lombards in the VI-VIII Centuries, and Franks in the VIII-IX Centuries.

The Lombardic invader of Italy minted their first money as an imitation of the Empire issues. For long time the coins contain approximative reproductions of Imperial coins and sometimes meaningless texts. Only during the reign of Cunincpert (688-700) the coins assumed a distinctive aspect: the introduction of his own name and on the reverse side, the winged figure of St Michael, the Saint patron of the Longobards (Wroth, 1911).

An example of the image of Saint Michael is evident in the Solidus of King Sico, in Figure 8: one side has the image of the king, the reverse the Saint with a crosier in his right hand and the globus cruciger on the left. The text "Michael Archangelu Conob" contains the name of the Saint and "Conob", an imitation of the Byzantine mints to indicate golden coins from Constantinople.



Figure 8. Solidus of King Sico (817 -832), Mint of Benevento: main side bust of the King with the globus cruciger, reverse side image of Saint Michael Archangel with a crosier and the globus cruciger (Graziosi, 2022).

In the Bible the Archangel San Michele is the chief of army of angels, a warrior; his devotion diffused in Italy mainly irradiating from the monastery of San Michele on the Gargano mountain, in Apulia.

Some interesting acronyms on Longobard coins are:

- “M H” to indicate Michael, represented on a denarius of King Adelchis (Anno Domini 853-878) ;
- “MIHA” to indicate Michael Archangelus on a denarius of King Radelchis II (Anno Domini 881-884), (Wroth, 1911, p.185-187).

The coins are only one example of the importance of Saint Michael in the Catholic traditions. The previous tomb of Emperor Adrianus, placed near the Vatican in Rome, is called Castel Sant Angelo in honour of Saint Michele, the Defensor of the City of Vatican.

The devotion to San Michele acquired importance in most of Europe during the Middle Ages, as the Saint represents the defense of Faith against evil. This idea was supported by an apocryphal text, “The assumption of Moses”, that describes a contentious argument between the Saint and Evil to keep possession of the body of the Prophet.

An evidence of this fight is in a letter of Saint Bruno of Cologne (1030-1101) , an intellectual of XII Century, quoted by G. Marangoni, (Marangoni, 1763, p.5); The letter says : “...Michael pugnat cum Diabolo principe Daemoniorum.” [Saint Michele fight against Evil, prince of Demons]. This reference confirms also that the form Michael for the name San Michele was in use in XI-XII Centuries.

The epigraphic tradition to use acronyms and the relevant role of Saint Michele support the hypothesis that the inscription with M H A indicates:

MicHael Archangelus

When there is a demoniac presence, it is mandatory to keep it apart and call the Saints to help. The position of the inscription near the door of religious buildings, and in the special case, the double inscription at the Barga Duomo, confirms its ritual role.

The inscription was an invitation to call Saint Michael Archangel three times before acceding to the sacred building. The Saint could protect them against bad influxes.

The choice of the number “three” is not arbitrary, because since more than three millennia ago, this number has a special meaning in religious rites.

In the tradition of Middle Ages repeating the Psalms three times is the recommendation present in the book “Rationale Divinorum Officiorum” of Guillaume Durand (1230-1296) and, in the latin expression: “Propter hos ordines tres psalmos dicimus...” (Durando, 1612, p. 229)

Another use of the number is the three words added under the inscription in the manuscript of Lucca, “immensitas, unitas, veritas”; they are a reference to three relevant characteristics of God and are in relation with the three triangles, a Trinity symbol.

In the Middle Ages rituals, there is a tendency to give relevant positions to the Saints, but this could support suspicious of heresy, so a reference to the unity of God was always necessary.

4. Discussion

The choice to compare the apparently mysterious inscription with religious texts from Middle Ages documents led to the hypothesis that the inscription contains an invocation to Archangel Saint Michael, and the three Latin letters M, H and A in every group of symbols are acronyms to Michael Archangelus.

The religious message of the inscription is related to many concepts of the culture of the Middle Ages:

- The insertion of apotropaic texts near the door of a house is widely adopted during the Roman era, especially against aversion to natural events. In the Middle Ages the triple call to San Michele, who fights a dragon, recalls the fear of Evil influxes, so the main fears became supernatural.
- A believer calls for the aid of the Saint in a form of purification. It is evident in the inscription on the Baptistery of Pisa that Saint Michael and the christening are both a supports to save the soul.
- Saint Michele, Michael, is a warrior and in an era of violence, when the society was dominated by a group of warriors, there is no surprise to his large popularity.
- The contrast described in the inscription of Barga is between two angels: Saint Michael, the chief of positive angels and Evil/Lucifer, a fallen angel.
- The repeated reference to the number three puts in evidence the special role of this number in the religion. More than one thousand years before it was already part of the rituals of Etruscan and Raetic, populations that created the protohistoric cultural substrate of the Italian Peninsula, where towns of Lucca and Pisa are inserted.

The mysterious inscription contains the Latin alphabet in a version used in XI-XII Centuries, when in some churches of Tuscany the believers had the opportunity to observe it every time they accessed to the religious places.

The main subject is a relevant figure, Saint Michael, the Defensor against the temptations represented by Evil.

The believers call three times the Saint in an apotropaic request to be protected, implicitly recognizing their weakness.

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