

From Genoa to Yangzhou? Funerary Monuments for Europeans in Yuan China and their Paleographic Analysis

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This article scrutinizes two extraordinary funerary monuments to members of the Ilioni family from Genoa through paleographical methods. Erected in 1342 and 1344 respectively, they commemorate Caterina and Antonio, two children of an Italian merchant that died as members of the small Catholic community in the central Chinese trade hub of Yangzhou. Although well known in recent debates on the history of medieval travel and occasionally discussed in an art-historical context, they have not yet received an in-depth epigraphic analysis. In doing so for the first time, the article argues for the importance of such material, as processes of acculturation can be traced in the development of the scripts themselves. The epigraphy of these monuments is both in line with contemporary letter styles from northern Italy and, at the same time, epigraphic observations show how the influences of Chinese characters were slowly included in the Latin text. In sum, the authors argue that it is most likely that a Franciscan missionary gifted with some craftsmanship as a stonemason generated this part of the two funerary slabs, and that this in turn forces us to think about late medieval practices of epigraphic production in Europe at the time, too. What seemed at first an exotic case of “global epigraphy” reveals itself on second glance as an example that teaches a valuable lesson about the role of friars in the epigraphy of Latin Europe more widely.

Keywords: China, Genoa, Yuan dynasty, medieval trade, palaeography, Franciscans, Yangzhou

By analyzing the script of funerary monuments created for Europeans in Yuan China (mid-13th to mid-14th century), this article deals with a niche of the epigraphy of Latin Europe in the later Middle Ages. The number of such monuments is small, the material difficult to access, and their layout might seem exotic to the classical epigraphist most familiar with material from Latin Europe. Indeed, their alterity can largely account for why these monuments have not garnered much attention from specialists in medieval Latin epigraphy, although

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they are well known to art historians and historians interested in cultural and economic exchanges between Asia and Europe in the Middle Ages. Two monuments to the children of the Genoese merchant Domenico de Ilioni in Yangzhou have been studied in detail, albeit with a clear focus on their iconography, but their script has still not been adequately addressed.¹ This article takes up this desideratum and offers a deeper insight into the Catholic mission in Yuan China as well as fresh perspectives on the production of tomb inscriptions since the early 14th century in Europe more generally.

After introducing the material sources, we analyze the script of the two Yangzhou tombstones and highlight their place within the Latin epigraphy of the Italian peninsula in the early 14th century. Focusing our attention on these two inscriptions alone (and leaving aside the much better discussed iconography of the two pieces), we argue that these stone slabs were not simply the product of a local Chinese stonemason who followed a script provided by the Latin Christians in Yuan Yangzhou, but that one of the Franciscan friars must have been a talented artisan and stonecutter, too, who produced the script that accompanied the more collaborative work by a Chinese stonecutter in regard to the complex pictures incised in these monuments. Whereas the iconography used local forms, especially ones taken from Buddhist art, to narrate a basically Christian story, the script is Latin European, but shows a need to adapt to the style of Chinese characters. The monuments reveal the efforts towards transcultural interaction on both sides, a local artisan elite and the Franciscan missionaries, difficult to grasp in our other sources from the period.

From this, new basic insights arise on both the nature of the Franciscan mission to Yuan China and European epigraphy as a whole. As it turns out, the missionary work in Asia went hand in hand with the faculty of the Franciscan friars to conceptualize tomb markers, an essential tool for memorializing the deceased of their newly found flock and necessary for ensuring the prayer for the dead so central to late-medieval Catholic piety. This in turn allows us to rethink the importance of Franciscan communities in Europe in the making of funerary inscriptions, often overlooked or underestimated by medieval epigraphy. Here, too, the concept and execution of the script might have come from the Franciscans' own hands, changing our idea of inflexible boundaries between artisans (the stonecutter) and clerics (the mendicants) in producing such funerary monuments. After all, they are both pieces of art and liturgical remembrance, and their production mirrors such a dual functionality – not just in Yuan China, but in the multifaceted world of Latin Christians in the 14th century as a whole.

1 The first discussions on these tombstones were published by Rouleau, *Tombstone*; Rudolph, *Tombstone*. Rubbings of both tombstones are reproduced in: Enoki, *Nestorian Christianity*, 65 (plate V); Reichert, *Erfahrung der Welt*, 191-192. See also Purtle, *The far side*, 178-182; Arnold, *Princely Gifts*, 138-141; Clarke, *Catholic Identities*, 21-24; Petech, *Yangzhou* and Lopez, *Nouveaux documents*, 455-456. It is noteworthy that the epigraphy of the two monuments has been scrutinized in more detail by one of the earlier Chinese researchers, cf. Xia, *Guangzhou*. See also Geng, *Yangzhou*. We thank Aaron Vanides (Heidelberg University) for the in-depth discussion of the arguments of this article and his help in improving the English style.

Funerary Monuments of Europeans in Yuan China

Since the second half of the 20th century, research by historians (and, to a lesser degree, art historians) has established the interconnectedness of the Eurasian world in the roughly one hundred years between the Mongol invasion into Eastern Europe in around 1240 and the mid-14th century, after which the Black Death, political instability in the Mongol Empire, and the replacement of the Mongol Yuan dynasty by the Han-Chinese Ming resulted in the end of easy economic and cultural exchange between Eastern Asia and Latin Europe.² After the terrors of the first devastation by the Mongol army in Eastern Europe ceased, the expansion of the Mongol empire opened up roads for merchants and missionaries from Latin Europe, and especially from Italy into Central Asia, India and China. The relative religious pluralism at the court of the khans and the greater trust that the Mongol emperors of China placed in foreigners than in the Han Chinese meant that travel, trade, and proselytization could flourish. This was the time in which Marco Polo and Odorico da Pordenone travelled to China, and the first archbishopric in Dadu/Beijing was established by John of Montecorvino, to name but a few major figures who left important records that gives us glimpses into their voyages.³

In establishing a Catholic Church structure in Yuan China, the Franciscans started to build churches, baptize locals, tried to get an influential position at the emperor's court, and cared for the souls of those merchants from Latin Europe who were active in China. Thus, it is no coincidence that they erected major churches not only in Dadu/Beijing, at the heart of the imperial administration, but in the most active trading hubs like the port of Quanzhou or the cities of Hangzhou and Yangzhou as well. We know that European merchants were crucial for the survival of the Franciscan mission in China, and as a major market town for the trade within the empire, Yangzhou, on the Grand Canal, became particularly attractive for these European merchants.⁴

The missionaries not only built churches, but they cared for the souls of the growing flock that they had under their spiritual guidance, too. This meant that burials were as important as baptisms, and helping the deceased members of the community end their suffering in purgatory was as important in China as it was back home in Europe. Cemeteries were built, and tombstones erected, mentioning the date of death and assisting a proper "memoria", ensuring the liturgical prayers to help the dead in their suffering in purgatory; this was simply part of the normal Western Christian way of life in both worlds at the outer fringes of the Eurasian land mass. Sources on the actual fulfillment of these duties by the Franciscans are scarce; they do, however, exist.

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- 2 This is a field that has been well researched in the last decades. For an overview, cf. Waterson, *Defending Heaven*; Bernardini and Guida, *I Mongoli*; Jackson, *Mongols*; Schmieder, *Europa*.
 - 3 Here, too, a rich bibliography is available. Cf. amongst others: Philipps, *Before Orientalism*; Khanmohamadi, *Others's Word*; O'Doherty, *Indies*; Vogel, *Marco Polo*; Münkler, *Erfahrung des Fremden*; Larner, *Marco Polo*; Reichert, *Begegnungen* and De Rachewiltz, *Papal Envoys*.
 - 4 On this, see the remarks in Finnane, *Yangzhou*, 43-68 (who mentions the tombstones briefly *ibid.* 44, but highlights the important position of Yangzhou in trade); Arnold, *Princely Gifts*; Purtle, *The far side*; Reichert, *Asien*, 293-318; Lopez, *Nouveaux documents*; Lopez, *Nuove luci* and Lopez, *European merchants*.

The surviving funerary monuments from late medieval Franciscan China are not at all numerous. There are many reasons for this, but the complete collapse of the Catholic Church structure in China after 1350 or so plays a central role: already struggling after the death of John of Montecorvino and drained by the dysfluent influx of Franciscans from Europe, the rise of the Ming brought an end to the Franciscan missions in the Middle Kingdom. Churches and cemeteries were then either destroyed or repurposed, the building material – like tombstones – recycled for public structures. It seems that there are only three extant monuments associated with Western Christianity from the Yuan period, one in Quanzhou and two in Yangzhou. In the case of the Yangzhou tombstones, one of the two was recently exhibited in the China Maritime Museum in Shanghai in the course of the exhibition “The Sea is Right There”, and both monuments are part of the collection of the Yangzhou Museum. Although the tombstone of Caterina was accessible to us in the form of the photograph published in this article (Figs. 1, 2), the tombstone of Antonio is for the moment only accessible via the rubbings and pictures taken from the tombstones shortly after they were unearthed in 1952 (Figs. 3, 4).⁵

5 On the Shanghai exhibition “The Sea is right there”, cf. its website (including a picture of Caterina’s tombstone amongst its showpieces): <https://exhibit.artron.net/exhibition-71301.html> (accessed on 9 January 2021). We thank Cai Tingting, Shanghai Maritime Museum, and Zhuang Zhijun, Yangzhou Museum, for their kind assistance in our research. Unfortunately, only Caterina’s tombstone is currently available for research, whilst Antonio’s tombstone seems to be lost for the moment, but might resurface in the future in the museum’s depot. Although Clarke, *Catholic Identities*, 22, after 82 (Image 1), and 209 (n. 40) mentioned difficulties in accessibility in 2009, Caterina’s tombstone at least has been publicly shown since then. A picture in this publication shows Francis Rouleau in front of one of the rubbings that after him were used by nearly all publications on the stones. Clarke quotes Finnane, *Yangzhou*, 341, n. 8, where the author remarks dryly: “The gravestones can be viewed in the Yangzhou museum.” We thank Folker Reichert for making us aware of this discussion of the Yangzhou tombstones, Felix Martin for pointing us towards the exhibition of Caterina’s piece in Shanghai, and Yen-Hsi Beyer for getting in touch with the museums in Shanghai and Yangzhou. The catalogue of the Shanghai exhibition was not yet available to us, but probably will be in early 2022.



Fig. 1: The tombstone of Caterina de Ilioni at the Yangzhou Museum in 2021 (picture by courtesy of the Yangzhou Museum)



Fig. 2: Photograph of the original rubbing of Caterina's tombstone, today in the Yangzhou Museum (picture by courtesy of the Yangzhou Museum)



Fig. 3: The rubbing of Antonio de Ilioni's tombstone, as published in: Geng, Yangzhou, 449.



Fig. 4: The tombstone of Antonio de Ilioni, as published in: Xia, Guangzhou, 534.

The Quanzhou monument is the tombstone of Andrew of Perugia, a Franciscan friar and bishop of Quanzhou, who died in 1332. It was found in 1946, and its original is said to be in a Beijing museum, with a copy of the monument still housed at the Maritime museum of Quanzhou. Photographic reproductions of the tombstone available to us reveal a Latin inscription, beginning with a cross and “hic” (“Here”), but it is nearly impossible to say more about the paleography of the monument on the basis of this material alone.⁶ From the images, it seems as if the inscription was already both worn down at the time of rediscovery in the mid-20th century and of a rather mediocre quality in the first place: this is highlighted by the slightly irregular setting of the rows, their placement in the center of a stone which is only partially carved, and a final row that ends after only half its possible length in the text block, pointing to a lack of conceptualization for the script, even though there was no need to save space in this case. The script appears to be a kind of Rotunda, or at the very least, a different script from the one used in the two examples from Yangzhou, and the inscription shows a closeness to Latin book hands, which, even if poorly executed, may have relevance for the material in Yangzhou as well. The monument to Andrew of Perugia has already been analyzed in detail by the art historian Jennifer Purtle, and this article cannot add much to her work on the iconography of the piece.⁷

On the other hand, the situation of the tombstones in Yangzhou is different, since there are good pictures of the rubbings made at the time of their excavation only a couple of years after the discovery of Bishop Andrew’s monument, and one of them was recently exhibited in the already mentioned Shanghai exhibition. These funerary monuments were erected for two siblings, Caterina Ilioni, who died in 1342, and Antonio Ilioni, her brother, who died shortly afterwards in 1344. They were found in the foundations of a rampart of the city wall of Yangzhou in 1952, in a segment built in or around 1357.⁸ Since they were relatively recent at the time, the story of their immediate fate emerges reasonably clearly: after taking the town from Mongol/Yuan rule, Ming forces reorganized the city’s defenses and used the material from the Franciscan mission nearby. The change in attitude towards the foreign religion was made clear with this both symbolic and pragmatic act.

Since their discovery, there has been a minor controversy amongst researchers about the origins of the father of Caterina and Antonio. The idea that he might have been part of the Venetian family Vilioni has been dropped in favor of the more striking parallel with a Genoese merchant that Roberto Sabbatino Lopez found in documents of the time. Domenico de Ilioni is mentioned in the will of another Genoese merchant in 1348, and named as “in partibus Catagii”, which testifies to his presence and activity in Cathay, i.e. Yuan China.⁹

6 The best photograph of the inscription is found in a publication that came out a decade after the discovery: Wu Wenliang, *Quanzhou*, 28, fig. 75.2. The monument was also included in the short catalogue: *Quanzhou zongjiao shi ke chen lie guan*, 7, fig. 9. Cf. also the remarks by Clarke, *Catholic Identities*, 18-20, who also hints at “a few other tombstones with Latin inscriptions” at Quanzhou (*ibid.* 19), which we couldn’t find in the quoted literature (*ibid.* 207, n. 26).

7 Cf. Purtle, *The far side*, 180-181 and 184-186; Reichert, *Erfahrung der Welt*, 198; Arnold, *Princely Gifts*, 81 and 136; Enoki, *Nestorian Christianity*, 63; Foster, *Crosses*, 17-25; On Andrew, see Moule, *Christians in China*, 189-195.

8 Rouleau, *Tombstone*, 350-351; Geng, *Yangzhou*, 449; Xia, *Guangzhou*, 532.

9 Lopez, *Nouveaux documents*, 455-56. Cf. also Purtle, *The far side*, 178-182.

Although this identification is convincing, the insecurity lingered in later publications, although several authors insisted that it must have been this Domenico de Ilioni from Genoa.¹⁰ Since Domenico is explicitly named in both inscriptions, this discussion could have included the paleography of the two monuments, but astoundingly this was not the case.¹¹ Once more, epigraphy is notably absent.¹²

This is true for the analysis by art historians, too.¹³ Here, the transcultural aspects of the iconography have been studied in greater detail, so that we can take for granted that it was a Chinese artisan who engraved the pictures according to Western Christian iconography, probably described or shown to him by the commissioner of the tomb stones (or someone acting on the commissioner's behalf, i.e. a Franciscan friar). The framework for the style used was taken from local tradition, using the same basic elements common to Buddhist art of the time. The basic form of the tombstones with their curved and pointed upper parts and the prominent floral motive in the rim was common in contemporary Nestorian, Manichean, and Muslim funerary monuments in China, so here several influences were merged and formed a new style, blending traditions from Latin Europe with dominant Chinese and local Buddhist art, and funerary culture common in other minority groups in the region.¹⁴

In the case of Caterina's tomb marker, we can name several such elements of cultural hybridity: the angels without feet, resembling depictions of ghosts in the Chinese tradition; Saint Catherine with a Buddhist crown on her head whilst kneeling between two wheels that deviate from European wheels used in capital punishments at the time (probably the result of the Chinese master's imagination); Mary seated on a Chinese bench and with a prominent halo, making her resemble Guanjin; and a figure kneeling in front of the decapitation of

10 Xia, Guangzhou, 533. Cf. also Reichert, *Begegnungen*, 80 and 86; Reichert, *Erfahrung der Welt*, 192.

11 In fact, the analysis of the reading of Domenico's family name is a little tricky. In contrast to the only *V* in the inscription (the *QVI* in the fourth line of Antonio's inscription), the first letter of *VILIONIS* has – in both inscriptions – a small additional hook at the lower end, but since the writer(s) of these inscriptions love a certain variation in their embellishment of the letters, it is more likely that this is indeed a *V*, making it *VILIONIS*, not *YILIONIS* (with a superfluous *I* after *Y*), and certainly not *YLLIONIS*, as sometimes stated (e.g. Reichert, *Begegnungen*, 80, n. 90; Finnane, Yangzhou, 341, n. 8), since the second letter is undoubtedly an *I*. This said, the name of the Genoese family might well have been written with a number of variants, including Ilioni, Viglioni and Vilionis (and, therefore, Arnold's and our own earlier use of Vilionis as the family name is mistaken, although it might well match with the paleography of the stone; cf. Arnold, *Princely Gifts*, 138–141; Schmitz-Esser, Odorich von Pordenone, 149; Schmitz-Esser, Buddha, 329). We thank Tino Licht (Heidelberg University) for his help in analyzing this (and other) puzzling detail(s) of the inscription.

12 At least Purtle, *The far side, 180–184*, noticed the close resemblance of Genovese inscriptions from the Black Sea region with the script used here. For Rouleau, *Tombstone*, 347 and 359, the Franciscan friars were responsible for the execution of all aspects of the tombstones, but the discussion since then has made this highly improbable, leaving us with the need for a closer analysis. The only detailed analysis that even includes the slightly irregular use of the dots in between words is provided by Xia, Guangzhou, 532–535.

13 For the following, cf. esp. Purtle, *The far side, 180–184*; Arnold, *Princely Gifts*, 129–141. That the artist was Chinese is stated by Reichert, *Erfahrung der Welt*, 192, too.

14 Rudolph, *Tombstone*, 134, quotes corresponding examples from Quanzhou, and a collection of them is found in Wu Wenliang, *Quanzhou*. The rim has gained less attention, but was already classified as adorned with Chinese motives by Xia, Guangzhou, 535.

Catherine on the right-hand side, clad in the robe of a Buddhist monk, perhaps a Franciscan friar or, more probable in comparison with such artworks in Latin Europe, the father and commissioner of the work, holding the deceased child in his hand.¹⁵

In the case of Antonio's slab, the Chinese elements are less pronounced, but the principle of borrowing an essentially Buddhist style to depict Christian iconography remains the same: here, for example, Christ resides in heaven on a Chinese bench (instead of a rainbow), and the angels to his side again lack feet. Saint Anthony and the scene of the resurrection seem to have been less open to such a merging of traditions, but at least one figure in front of Saint Anthony resembles a person in Buddhist robes. But the script? Was it a Chinese workshop that engraved the Latin letters, or is this the work of another hand? Do we see the same merging of cultures manifested in the letterforms? It is time to turn to the paleography of the funerary monuments from Yangzhou.

Palaeography of the Yangzhou Tombstones

The two funerary monuments from Yangzhou are undoubtedly the work of a trained stoneworker who knew the Latin script and contemporary styles used in Latin Europe. That is, he must have not only been able to read and write; he also knew how to reproduce letters in a style fashionable at the time in Italy. The regularity of the letters, their articulate execution and the composition of the text are markers of his epigraphic expertise. This artisan plays with his letterforms, and uses decorative elements with an experienced hand.

But let's start with some basic observations. One can easily overlook the fact that the tombstones are relatively small in scale: Caterina's monument measures 58 by 48.8 cm,¹⁶ similar to Antonio's stone at 59.7 by 37.5 cm. In Caterina's case, the text block was measured at 24 by 28 cm, and the letters with a height of circa 3 cm.¹⁷ Caterina's inscription reads:

“+ INNOMINE · D(OMI)NI · AMEN · HIC · JACET / KATERINA · FILIA · QONDAM · DOMINI · / D(OMI)NICI · DE · VILIONIS · QUE · OBIIT · IN / ANNO · DOMINI · MILEXIMO · CCC^o · / XXXX^o · II^o · DE · MENSE · JUNII +”

In Antonio's case, the text is similar:

“+ INNOMINE · D(OMI)NI · AMEN / HIC JACET · ANTONIUS · FILI(US) / QONDAM D(OMI)NI · DOMINICI · DE / VILIONIS · QVI · MIGRAUIT / ANNO · D(OMI)NI · M^o CCC^o XXXX^o IIII^o / DE · MENSE · NOUEMBRIS +”¹⁸

15 Xia, Guangzhou, 535, mentions the child in the hands of this figure, but identifies the main figure as a monk. In Western art of the time, the commissioners of such works of art often kneel besides the pictures of the saints, and it seems more likely that this is the reason why the figure of the father is kneeling here and holding the child at the same time. For a Franciscan monk, such a depiction seems highly unlikely and makes no iconographic sense.

16 The measurements were also taken in the recent Shanghai exhibition, and differ slightly: here, the tombstone of Caterina was measured at 62 by 50 cm, with a depth of 12.5 cm.

17 The measurements are provided by Xia, Guangzhou, 532 and 535.

18 This transcript does not note the special characteristics of the script, discussed in the following chapter in greater detail, but indicates ligatures by underlining such letters. The variations between *I* and *J* are – with the exception of *JACET* – omitted, because their distinction seems less than clear cut in the two inscriptions, whereas *V* and *U* were distinguishable and given here as they appear. To add but one detail: the first to note the consequent use of dots to distinguish the words in Caterina's inscription was Xia, Guangzhou, 532, who also included the remark that it was only absent at the very beginning of the text, leaving *INNOMINE* indistinct. The same is more or less true for Antonio's inscription (another omission here is the dot in between *QONDAM* and *D(OMI)NI* in the third line), although here the dots are set more carefully at the mid-height of the letters than in Caterina's case, where they sometime drop to the baseline.

Indeed, palaeographic analysis clearly confirms the quality of execution of the letters used, in particular by carefully observing variants in key letters such as *A*, *I* and *M*. The ability to alternate different but related forms within a well-defined canon of letters demonstrates a profound knowledge of the writing practices of the time, as well as familiarity with the particularities of epigraphic writing in a specific geographic area. Even the elements belonging to the decorative apparatus have epigraphic significance, despite being only seemingly unimportant simple “additions” to the letters that enhance the complexity of the inscription’s graphic modes. In our case, this is evident, for example, in the systematic use of a type of pearl for the capital *I*, or in the ligatures and conjunctions of letters, some of which are more familiar (such as that between *A* and *N*) and some of a more novel nature (e.g. dividing the closing fillet of *E*, a decorative element, with the minuscule ascender of the letter *N*, a structural element). This use of letters and ornaments is inherent to the epigraphic system of that time, and only those who mastered it would have been able to create high-quality fonts like these.

The comparison of the two funerary monuments reveals remarkable aspects that are both common and yet specific for each individual. From a palaeographic point of view, the two objects share most of the graphic shapes of the letters, the ends widened in a wedge shape, as well as the punctuation in the form of a single point in the middle position, as well as the typology of letter connections, which we can call a *ligature*. Based on these elements, one could imagine the two grave slabs being constructed contemporaneously, perhaps even by the same stonemason.¹⁹

The inscription for Antonius nevertheless shows some characteristics and also quite remarkable features. We refer specifically to the use of *H*-shaped spellings relating to the letter *N*,²⁰ and the digits of the date, where the four *X*s are also interlaced in a peculiar way in order to match a real Chinese decoration. These two details, which are used with stylistic and aesthetic intent, could be of primary importance for situating the stonemason’s background, and we will come back to these peculiarities in a moment. At the same time these details raise further questions: If it was the same stonemason, why should such distinguishing features only be found in one plate? Are we seeing here a choice of style, for example to emphasize the importance of the son over the daughter, or is this a hint at the production processes and transcultural teamwork that might have been at play here?

The quality of the characters present in the two slabs can be attributed to a craftsman who has mastered the Latin writing system of stylistic models currently customary in Italy. In other words, he was therefore not only highly qualified to read and write, but also knew the stylistic models of his time. In particular, he was also an expert in epigraphic writing: the evenness, the execution of the letters and, in general, the entire text composition as well as

19 The hypothesis is supported by the assumption that there might not be many experts in epigraphic writing in this region of Asia in the mid-14th century.

20 At first we thought it was an alphabetic element from the Greek language. The letter eta has the same shape but corresponds to the letter H. Further research has shown that the letter N has the form H in the Cyrillic alphabet. However, an influence of this alphabetical system is currently difficult to justify in this production.

the ability to regularly create letter games and the decorative elements point to the work of an expert hand.²¹

This is attested by the use of elements that belong to an earlier writing style (such as the *A* with a broken crossbar) and of others that are typical of a later script (such as the *F* or the *E*, which is closed with a fillet), and this can also be seen in the shaping of the writing of the apparatus as well as in the technique of sculpting the stone itself. However, the artisan probably did not pursue this as his main activity and used manuscript texts for the shapes of the letters, knowing how to use them correctly when creating an epigraphic text.

The stylistic peculiarities of the epigraphic text point to an experienced stonecutter among the members of the Franciscan congregation in Yangzhou in the 14th century. This leaves us with the problem that there is no evidence for the existence of a professional European stonecutter in Yuan China, as already stated above. But maybe we do not have to take this leap if we assume that a member of the clergy in Yangzhou was also a specially trained craftsman. That such an Italian friar might have been the conceptualizer – if not realizer – of our two inscriptions is made more probable by a look at the formulae used, which do seem to fit nicely into models used in early 14th-century Italy.

In both grave tombstones, the religious text is preceded by the formula “*In nomine Domini, amen*”, which is typical for notarial deeds. In one study, Lorenzo Tomasin points to a similar practice that can be found in an inscription in the Church of Sant’Andrea near Belluno (Italy).²² Given the presence of the Franciscans in Belluno from the end of the 13th century, it makes sense to assume that the stonecutters in Yangzhou could have come from these places (or at least from Veneto). The use of *MILEXIMO* in Caterina’s script might hint at this background, too, since the use of *X* for a voiceless *S* is still in use in the Venetian dialect and is proudly considered one of the things which differentiate it from standard Italian to this day.

A little unusual is the double reference to death in the formula used in both inscriptions: both siblings are lying here (*JACET*, a common word to mark death and burial in funerary inscriptions) and were once (*QONDAM*) the daughter or son of Dominicus, i.e. they are deceased.²³ It is not uncommon to find such double uses of “*jacet*” and “*quondam*” in Latin epigraphy of the time; the “*quondam*” is always used to refer to a status or office that ceased either before or because of death. A nice 14th-century example is the tomb marker for an other Catherina, the wife of Arnold Voet, mayor of Stralsund, in Northern Germany. Dated to 1355 and once placed in St Nicolas’ Church in the Hanseatic city on the Baltic Sea, here we find a similar formula: “*Hic Jacet Catherina quondam uxor D(omi)ni Arnoldi voet*” etc., mirroring the wording on the Yangzhou stones.²⁴ A parallel example is provided by the in

21 The most frequently considered stylistic and decorative elements are the most obvious, such as the pearls often used in the capital letter *I*, the shape of the triangle tip, the alternation between the simple *me* and the *me* in a sinuous shape, the play of letters. The ends of the sections drawn with small curves or loops, as well as all the details in the realization of the sections that would end up in the decorative system, are more difficult to attribute to the executor of the panel or to the hand responsible for its discharge. As a concrete example, take a look at the upper part of the letter *I* in its sinuous variant: the fragmentation between the horizontal and vertical section can hardly be traced back to one or the other creation, although it is a characteristic feature in both grave inscriptions.

22 “*In Chr(ist)i no(m)i(n)e am(en), anno / D(omi)ni Mcccl. Fata fo ques/sta glesia a onor de s(an)c(t)o / Andrea ap(osto)li, p(er) ord(e)nam(en)to d(e) / s(er) A(n)drea e Pero so fiol, de intro / glesia e fiska far dona / Bonavintura muier che fo / del dito Pero*”, Stussi 1980, 95, quoted in: Tomasin, *Filologia romanza*, 515.

23 This already puzzled Xia, *Guangzhou*, 533, as a peculiarity of these inscriptions.

24 Magin, *Stralsund*, No. 22.

scription on the tomb of a certain Hildegard von Waldeck in the monastery of Disibodenberg, dated to 1368 and today also lost.²⁵ In a roughly contemporaneous inscription from Worms, a certain knight is even named as “filius quondam” after the use of the verb “obiit”.²⁶ To quote one more example, an epitaph in Hildesheim names a dean of the church he is buried in as “decanus quondam huius ecclesie”.²⁷ So far, the exploration of the palaeography and formula used in the Yangzhou tombstones fits very well into the broader picture of Latin epigraphy of the time back in Europe.

But, as already mentioned, there are paleographic aspects that really stand out in the Yangzhou tombstones, or, to be more precise, in Antonio’s case. The slightly younger inscription on his monument has a tendency to graphically bring letters together and to add them into a block by a slight rearrangement or addition. The most striking case is found in the date: here, the year is given with four *X*s (for four times ten, forty), which in itself is not at all unusual. But in contrast to Caterina’s slightly earlier tombstone the *X* figures are bound together in pairs so that they resemble two (instead of four) characters.²⁸ This is a creative solution, not known to us from any other Latin inscription; an observation that was confirmed in our discussion after the paper was presented at the Vienna conference “Wahrnehmung und Darstellung von Fremdem in Inschriften” in January 2020 to an audience of epigraphists. The writer’s desire to combine two Latin letters into a new, more square-like character could well be an influence of Chinese writing on this particular part of the inscription. Once this pattern is detected, it seems easy to draw parallels to other graphic elements within the same inscription: the following four *I*s that form the Latin equivalent for four are bound together by a horizontal line, like a strikethrough, which binds these letters together, too, so that they become one symbol for the number they represent. Although not foreign to European epigraphy, the ligatures used – like the *EM* in the next line (*NOUEMBRIS*) using the left line of the *M* as the back of the round *E* – are more frequently found in Antonio’s inscription than in Caterina’s, which fits well with the observations that such conglomerations of letters pleased the writer more now than two years earlier. A further detail is odd and needs some attention: the *FILI(US)* has an *L* with two vertical lines, a doubled or open back, so to speak. Again, this shapes the *L* into a square or block, and from a Latin epigraphist’s perspective it is an unusual error to make in writing this letter. When we go back to Caterina’s inscription with these observations in mind, at least one odd letter comes to the fore that might be a precursor to this development in script: in the fourth line, the *ANNO DOMINI* has an *M* which is different to all other *M*-forms used in either Yangzhou tombstone. It shows only half of the round *M* usually inserted in these inscriptions and uses a vertical shaft on the left to substitute half of the letter. Oddly, this shaft is not linked to the rest of the letter, and since the shaft is straight, it might not simply be the rest of a once well-preserved round form of an *M*, thus aligning this *M* with the *L* in Antonio’s case. Although this is the only such letter in Caterina’s inscription, the finding highlights that whatever was the reason for the development of script on Antonio’s funerary slab was already at work here, too. There is little doubt

25 We will only quote the important passage here: “Obiit Hildegardi vxor quondam Wilhelmi armigeri de Waldecke”; Nikitsch, *Bad Kreuznach*, No. 53.

26 “ANNO DOMINI M CCC LXIII III NONAS MAII OBIIT JOANNES CAMERARIUS MILES FILIUS QUONDAM HENRICI CAMERARII”; Fuchs, *Worms*, No. 144.

27 The epitaph dates to the year 1395; Wulf, *Hildesheim*, No. 107.

28 Obviously, it was the Chinese researchers that first noted this particularity, which at first led to the misreading of the year (1324 instead of 1344) before it was corrected. See the discussion in Xia, Guangzhou, 532 and 535.

that our observations suggest a certain kind of transcultural phenomenon, but unfortunately, the letters themselves are taciturn on the exact nature of this mutual influence: do we have here a Chinese artist or writer who is learning to write Latin script (and adapting it to be a little more Chinese), or is it a versed writer of Latin who is interested in experimenting to make his script look more Chinese, maybe inspired to do so because he is in the process of acculturating himself in Yangzhou?

It is possible that the Latin inscription was first written down on another medium (like paper) and then handed to a Chinese stonemason who recognized the form, outer décor, and pictures on the two funerary monuments, but our findings seem to imply agency on the part of the sculptor, not simply blind copying of a script with which he was not personally familiar. The novel formation of the four Xs is more likely the product of creative acculturation of only one element of the Latin script. In our view, this fits equally well with a person versed in Latin writing, but already living for a long time in a Chinese environment and absorbing the script used in daily life by the majority of the population. In this context, the Greek use of *H* for *N* (like within the word *D(OMI)NI* in Antonio's inscription, which is certainly not a casual error but a deliberate choice on behalf of the writer) seems another hint at somebody interested and versed in different alphabets. This could go a long way to explaining the peculiarities of Antonio's inscription, not found in any European parallel.

New Perspectives on Medieval Epigraphy in Latin Europe

From the paleographic analysis we can deduce at least some clues about the person responsible for the inscription, and it seems fruitful to us to at least attempt to piece together all the stray bits that we have extracted from the two funerary monuments at Yangzhou so far. The person who designed these inscriptions was obviously able to read and write in Latin, and he knew both the contemporary style of writing in Italy and the formulae used in funerary monuments of the time back in Latin Europe. Moreover, he must have been part of the Catholic community in Yangzhou, and, since his writing style evinces familiarity with the contemporary lettering styles from the first half of the 14th century, his arrival in China must have been relatively recent – he was not born and/or raised in China by European parents, as Caterina and Antonio de Ilioni may well have been. This leads us to the following scenarios and results of our study.

First hypothesis: The person whose work we analyzed was a stonemason from Italy. In fact, we know about a couple of European artisans that were active in the Mongol Empire, but their presence here was a result of the Mongol expansion in the 1240s and 1250s, when, for example, a Parisian goldsmith was captured by the Mongols whilst on a visit to Hungary.²⁹

But although we do know about the constant influx of Italian merchants into Yuan China, the evidence for a later migration of European artisans is – to our knowledge – non-existent. The script is, however, contemporary to the first half of the 14th century, so that this hypothesis leaves us with substantial doubt in the light of our knowledge about the Europeans' presence in China at the time. If we were to believe this scenario and argue that the sources are simply ignoring the fact of artisan migration from Latin Europe in the later Yuan period, we would have to acknowledge that the Catholic community in Yangzhou (and in China more generally) was much larger in the early 14th century than so far thought, consisting of a substantial expatriate kernel of believers who were working and living in the cities of the Middle

29 Van den Wyngaert, *Sinica Franciscana*, 253, 276-285; Cf. Olschki, *Guillaume Boucher*; Purtle, *The far side*, 170-177; Reichert, *Begegnungen*, 70 and Schmieder, *Europa* 54.

Kingdom. Further research could – and should – concentrate not only on the merchants and their influence on the mutual exchange of goods, but on artisans and the search for their influence in Chinese art, too.

But, since we have serious reservations about this scenario, a second hypothesis seems more likely, though not any less interesting in its consequences: the writer might have been one of the Franciscan missionaries active in Yuan China, and he could even have been one of the friars that were sent by the pope to aid John of Montecorvino in the early 14th century, after the future archbishop of Beijing asked for more support in a letter addressed to the head of his church back in Latin Europe.³⁰ This would draw connections between our textual and artistic sources and everything would fit in nicely with what we know about the presence of Europeans in Yuan China from the time the tombstones were erected. But the consequence is that we have to assume that this friar was a stonemason and had more than rudimentary skills in this profession. The pope and the general of the order, then, had sent not only able men capable of preaching and versed in theology to the East: they definitely sought men that were capable artisans as well, especially since their artistic skills were thought to come in handy in their prospective proselytization of the East.

These two scenarios do not necessarily exclude the possibility that the inscription was only designed by an Italian, but then, in a second step, the design was transferred to a model or sheet that was faithfully followed and copied by a Chinese artisan. It seems unlikely to us that such a scenario fits well with the fact that on the one hand, the pictorial side was obviously outsourced to a local workshop without especially close guidance from someone familiar with Western art, whilst on the other hand, the inscription shows no individual errors or freedoms in the way the script is designed, apart from very conscious, intelligent inclusions of innovative elements applying a Chinese logic within the framework of the Latin script. In this light, we think it more likely that the Italian designer of the script also incised it and left only the pictorial part to the Chinese workshop. Nevertheless, since we cannot be sure of the repartition of tasks in the process of carving these tomb stones or of the language skills within the Chinese workshop (did they learn Latin?), we must admit that this is as close as we come with our reasoning on the basis of all available data.

This leads us to two results of our analysis, and both challenge and shift our way of thinking about the late medieval Franciscan mission in Asia and our understanding of how funerary art was created back in Latin Europe and by whom. Regarding the missionary work, we can see that this endeavor was not only thought of in terms of religion as an immaterial spiritual concept. As Caroline Walker Bynum has recently stressed, the materiality of devotional practices was at the core of religious life in late medieval Europe,³¹ and this shaped the preparation of the missionary work, too. Already, in choosing able missionaries, Church authorities and the Franciscan order sought people who would be able to perform every aspect of Catholic life in the far-flung places they were sent to. Since it was obvious that they had to cover great distances and to work inside a Church network that was not tightly knit, neither on a personal level nor in geographic terms, they had to be all-rounders: able preachers, steadfast in their Franciscan lifestyle, and ideally craftsmen, too, who could perform their duties in regard to the proper memory of the deceased among their flock to secure

30 Van den Wyngaert, *Sinica Franciscana*, 349-350.

31 Bynum, *Dissimilar Similitudes*. Bynum, *Christian Materiality*.

their good fortune in the afterlife.³² Late-medieval Catholic doctrine about the afterlife comprised the idea of purgatory and stressed the importance of prayer for the deceased fellow Christians, and the mission in China had to incorporate this belief system and everything that went along with that within the backdrop of a new cultural setting. Since this was a point of departure from the Eastern churches, the correct way of dealing with the “memoria” played no minor role in the proselytization work of the Franciscan mission in East Asia. As a consequence, to create tombstones in the Western style must have been part of the job description for the friars sent to disseminate their particular version of Christianity in China. That they put some effort into this aspect of their task, and that they even had greater success in this regard, is proven by the Yangzhou tombstones themselves: not only does their materiality attest to the capability of producing tombstones whose inscriptions would have hardly seemed out of the ordinary back in a church in Italy, but the Chinese remark on Caterina de Ilioni’s tombstone shows that the community of Chinese Catholics thought of these slabs – and the role that the material aspects of devotion and prayer played for the deceased within their Christian practice – as an integral part of their new faith.³³

A second result of our study relates to the consequences that these inscriptions have for our understanding of the production of funerary monuments back in Latin Europe. It might be that we, as epigraphists, have been all too quick to assume that stonemasons were the producers of most of our medieval stone inscriptions. But it could well be that we see in them not so much the relicts of the work of lay specialists within medieval society, but of friars and members of other religious institutions of the time. Furthermore, the case of the Yangzhou tombstones might highlight the ubiquity of specialization, of division of labor, between those who cut the stone and carve images and décor onto them, and those who conceptualize the inscription and actually produce the script. Seen from this perspective, the conceptual distance between writing on paper and writing on stone seems to vanish, and there are good reasons to doubt that late-medieval practice lacked a clear-cut line between writing on parchment or paper and epigraphy as suggested by the modern differentiation of disciplines within historic research. This article seeks to challenge this view once more, emphasizing the fluidity between different modes of writing in the late-medieval period and highlighting the frequent transgression of differences in materiality by contemporaries. For the Franciscans in Yuan China, this flexibility was both necessary and useful in their daily work in China, and the Yangzhou tombstones speak to the emphasis placed on the correct care for the dead even at the outer fringes of the Catholic Church structure in East Asia. Global epigraphy can therefore demonstrate the possibilities for seemingly marginal and – in the true sense of the word – eccentric relicts of our past to become important triggers for both our methodological discussions in the narrow field of epigraphy and the broader master narrative of global history.

32 Cf. Schmitz-Esser, *Corpse*, 35-87, for an overview and more literature on this broad topic.

33 In the translation by Arnold, *Princely Gifts*, 138, the remark reads: “Yin-wei obtained [the pleasure] of seeing [this].”

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