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LETTERING THE MIGHT

Remarks on the Palaeography of the Inscriptions on the Fifteenth-century Medici Tombs in the Basilica of S. Lorenzo



By Outi Merisalo

This article examines the palaeography of the fifteenth-century funeral inscriptions of the Medici in S. Lorenzo, Florence in their material and historical context. The oldest monument, the sarcophagus of Giovanni di Bicci and Piccarda di Edoardo, from the 1430s, just as Cosimo the Elder's monument (c. 1468) are characterised by the expected traditional Florentine lettering without serifs but with increasingly classicising elements of presentation, as yet untouched by the antiquarian innovations of 1450-1460s Northern Italy, which restored the fully geometric classical monumental capitals as well as adopted the classical abbreviations and ancient formulae. As late as the early 1470s the Medici inscriptions maintained the early Renaissance Florentine epigraphical style.

1. Introduction

This article will examine the fifteenth-century funeral inscriptions of the Medici in the Florentine basilica of S. Lorenzo in order to analyse and contextualise their script and material characteristics.

1.1. Capitals *all'antica* in Florence c. 1400-c. 1430

The use of ancient-type capitals in Florence was infrequent outside manuscripts in the first decades of the fifteenth century.¹ They were first used by gold-smiths and sculptors and only later in frescoes and paintings. Interestingly, the first instances of monumental capitals may be found in ecclesiastical, not specifically humanistic contexts in the 1410s and 1420s, i.e. in the sculptures and objects containing short inscriptions on scrolls and

¹ For the first manuscripts in *littera antiqua* (1390s-1413), see De Robertis 2016.

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tablets, such as Ghiberti's statue of St John the Baptist outside the church of Orsanmichele, datable to c. 1412-1416 (Fig. 1).² Generally, the models of early fifteenth-century Florentine inscriptions are mediaeval, not ancient, as regards the often somewhat irregular spacing, very weak shading and the morphology of the letters, especially the absence of serifs (Fig. 1). Just as the *antiqua* script developed on the basis of late Carolingian minuscule, the capitals used in monumental contexts were of Carolingian inspiration (Figs 1 and 2). As in humanist texts in general, there was a gradual adoption of ancient dating (*Kalendae, Nonae, Idus*), ancient formulae and terminology (*papa* > *pontifex maximus* etc.) (Figs 2 and 3, still with *papa*).



Fig. 1 Ghiberti (1378-1455), St John the Baptist. Florence, Orsanmichele, 1419-1422. Note the absence of shading. Photo O. Merisalo

² Zamponi 2010, 64.

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Fig. 2 Donatello (c. 1386-1466) and Michelozzo (1396-1472), Epitaph to anti-pope John XXIII (1425-27) Florence, Baptistery. Photo O. Merisalo



Fig. 3 Epitaph to anti-pope John XXIII. Florence, Baptistery. Note the absence of serifs and the use of Roman dating combined with mediaeval formulae: *A(n)no D(omi)ni MCCCCXVIII XI Kalendas Ianuarii* (In the year of the Lord 1418, on 22 December). Photo O. Merisalo

1.3. Florence and Tuscany c. 1430-c. 1450

The monumental use of inscriptions in capitals *all'antica* strongly develops from the beginning of the 1430s onwards, on stone, metal and in frescoes. Both Michelozzo (inscriptions) and Paolo Uccello (1397-1475), whose 1436 fresco representing an equestrian statue of the condottiero John Hawkwood aka Giovanni Acuto (c. 1323-1394) in the Duomo of Florence sports an inscription in relatively regular, serified monumental capitals (Fig. 4), contribute to this development.



**Fig. 4 Paolo Uccello, John Hawkwood. Fresco.
Duomo, Florence. Photo Sailko. CC BY 3.0. Public domain**

A new phase began when the sculptor Donatello left for Padua in 1443, thanks to the mediation of Palla Strozzi (see below).³ In Padua he engaged in producing monumental capitals authentically modelled on Augustan geometric letter-forms, in conformity to North-Italian antiquarian scholarship that created the new, upright *antiqua* script and a new type of antiquarian decoration with archaeological elements and *all'antica* inscriptions for the humanist book (see below pp. 17-18).⁴

2. The tomb of Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici and Piccarda Di Edoardo de' Bueri (c. 1429/1433-1440?)

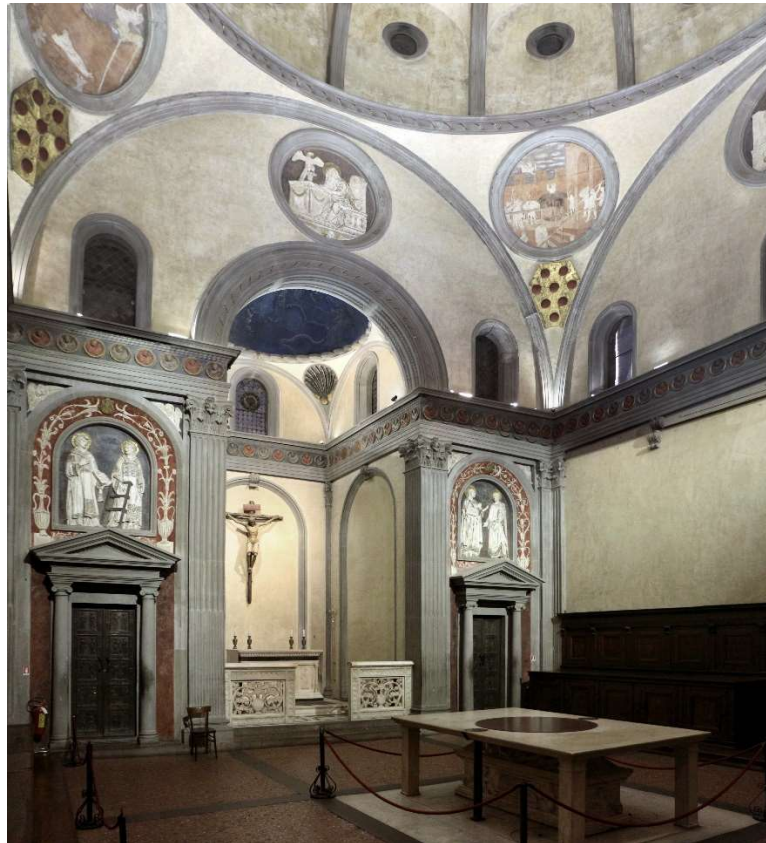


Fig. 5 S. Lorenzo, *Sagrestia vecchia*.
Photo Sailko, Wikimedia Commons

³ Sanzotta 2019.

⁴ Cf. Zamponi 2010, xx, and De Robertis 2016,

2.1. Giovanni di Bicci (c. 1360-1429) and Piccarda di Edoardo (1368-1433)

The *Sagrestia Vecchia* was built between 1422 and 1428 as a funerary chapel to celebrate the Medici.⁵ It was designed by Brunelleschi and decorated by Donatello.⁶ An important precedent was no doubt the sumptuous funerary chapel built for Nofri di Palla Strozzi (1345-1418) by his son, the eminent merchant, statesman, patron of the arts and humanist Palla Strozzi (1372-1462) in the sacristy of the basilica of S. Trinita, designed by Brunelleschi and Ghiberti, with an altarpiece by Gentile da Foligno in 1418-1423.⁷ The Strozzi sacristy might itself have been inspired by the sacristy of the House of Cavalcanti in S. Maria Novella, built in 1380. Both the Strozzi and the Medici were related by marriage to the Cavalcanti.⁸

The free-standing sarcophagus of Giovanni di Bicci and Piccarda di Edoardo, as such quite exceptional in fourteenth-fifteenth-century Italy,⁹ was made by Andrea Cavalcanti, also known as il Buggiano (1412-1462) and collaborators, possibly on a design by Donatello. It did not house the bodies, buried in a pier supporting the floor of the sacristy.¹⁰ Both the sarcophagus seeming to carry the weight of the marble table, complete with a protruding disk in imperial porphyry, used by the priests to prepare for mass,¹¹ and the actual burial place may be construed as demonstrating Giovanni di Bicci's eminent role as a benefactor and supporter of his parish church even beyond death.¹²

⁵ Kragelund 2021: 123; Davies 2019 interestingly tackles the site itself from the devotional point of view.

⁶ See Davies 2019, 15-16.

⁷ On Nofri Strozzi, see Tognetti 2019; on Palla Strozzi, see Sanzotta 2019; for the building history of the chapel, also see Davisson 1976, 318, and Tognetti 2019; for Nofri's tomb, an *arcosolium*, typical of Florentine men of power with the knightly status, see Butterfield 1994, 61-66. For the rivalry between the Houses of Strozzi and Medici, see e.g. Merisalo 2023.

⁸ Davies 2019, 6-8.

⁹ Butterfield 1994, 54.

¹⁰ For the sarcophagus, see Kragelund 2021, 126, and Davies 2019, 16-17; for Cavalcanti, see Hyman 1997.

¹¹ For the vesting table, see Davies 2019, 20-24.

¹² As convincingly argued by Davies 2019, 16-19.

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Fig. 6 The sarcophagus of Giovanni di Bicci and Piccarda di Edoardo. Inscription in prose on a parchment roll held by putti. Photo Sailko, GNU Free Documentation License

The sarcophagus presents two inscriptions, the one in prose providing biographical data on the committents and the deceased, and another in elegiac couplets with the funeral poem proper. Both the prose inscription,¹³ on a parchment roll held by putti, just as in the epitaph to John XXIII (Figs 2 and 3), and the one in elegiacs,¹⁴ inscribed on a Classicising *tabula ansata* also held by putti,¹⁵ present the same kind of capitals without serifs but an attempt at shading by thickening of strokes (Fig. 1). The oblique strokes of *M* do not

¹³ For the text, see Kragelund 2021: 126, who points out the possible influence (presence of both prose and elegiacs, linguistic details) of the first-century AD Atimetus Anterotianus monument (CIL 6.12652, IG 14.1892 and EDR 108740, http://www.edr-edr.it/edr-programmi/res_complex_comune.php?do=book&id_nr=edr108740, 14 September 2023), the inscription of which had been copied by Cyriac of Ancona in Rome, was known to Alberti, who was to quote it in his *De re aedificatoria*, and frequently found in humanist manuscripts.

¹⁴ For the text, see Kragelund 2021, 127.

¹⁵ This is the first known example of a *tabula ansata* with elegiac couplets in Florence, Kragelund 2021: 124.

touch the base line, just as in the John XXIII epitaph (also cf. the monument to Cosimo the Elder, Fig. 11). The *P* with a slightly open loop and the *R* hark back to Roman Republican-era inscriptions.¹⁶ The remarkably regular spacing and the use of abbreviations by suspension are further Classicising elements. It should also be noted that this is the first attestation in Florence of the Roman dating with the name of the month as an adjective in the accusative (prose inscription, l. 5: *X Kal. Martias*).¹⁷

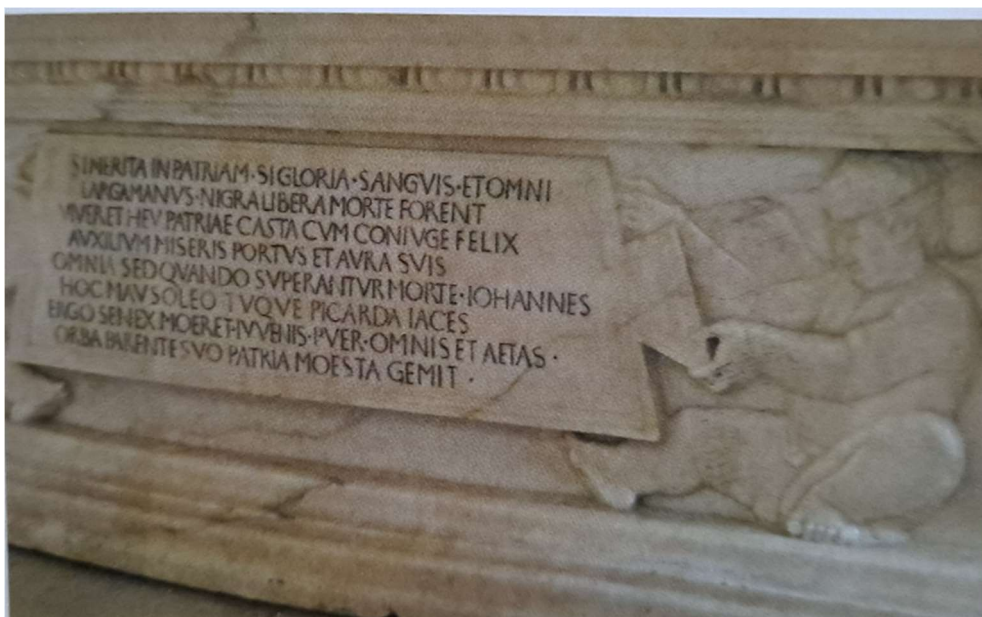


Fig. 7 The sarcophagus of Giovanni di Bicci and Piccarda di Edoardo. Inscription in elegiacs on a *tabula ansata* held by putti. Photo P. Kragelund (Fig. 7.3-4, Kragelund 2021: 129)

3. Humanism of the second half of the fifteenth century

3.1. Humanism and Humanistic script c. 1450-1500

It is well known that antiquarian studies (epigraphy and archaeology) dominate the Italian humanism of the second half of the fifteenth century. The centres for cutting-edge scholarship move from Florence to the North, Padua, Verona and Venice.¹⁸ An important event is Donatello's stay, mentioned above (p. 13) at Padua in 1443-1454. The inscription on the

¹⁶ As pointed out by the late Marco Buonocore at the colloquium.

¹⁷ Kragelund 2021, 128.

¹⁸ Zamponi 2010, 66.

pedestal of his statue of Gattamelata in Piazza del Santo of Padua, *OPVS DONATELLI .FLO(RENTINI)* (Work of Donatello the Florentine), datable to 1447-1453, exhibits fully-fledged Augustan-type capitals geometrically designed and complete with shading, a significant departure from the lettering previously used in monuments designed by him.¹⁹



Fig. 8 Donatello, monument to Gattamelata. Padua, Piazza del Santo (post 1447-ante 1453). Photo Nicoletta Giovè Marchioli

It is likely that he drew inspiration from the antiquarian experimentation in course, sponsored by such figures as Pietro Donato, bishop of Padua 1428-1447, who had an important library with epigraphical volumes, and Fantino Dandolo, bishop of Padua 1450-1459. The felicitous collaboration of the medical doctor Giovanni Marcanova (1410/1418-1467),²⁰ interested in epigraphy, the scribe Felice Feliciano (1433-1479) and the painter Andrea Mantegna (c. 1431-1506) gave a decisive spin to the dissemination of the new approach.²¹ Between 1451 and 1460, this transformation is visible not only

¹⁹ Zamponi 2010, 67.

²⁰ For Marcanova, see Gionta 1997 and De Robertis 2020, 538.

²¹ De Robertis 2020, 538.

in manuscripts and inscriptions but also in paintings featuring display texts by Mantegna, Giorgio Schiavone (c. 1433/36-1504) and their teacher, Francesco Squarcione (c. 1395 - after 1468), among others.²² The *antiqua* script takes a new form, with a writing angle of 90 degrees instead of the slightly right-inclined Florentine version. A new cursive, the *italica*, also makes its appearance. In addition, the Roman Augustan-era geometrical capitals are restored, just as are largely ancient abbreviations.²³ Around 1460, Felice Feliciano wrote a short Italian-language manual on how to proceed in creating the geometrical forms and shading, transmitted in Vatican City, BAV, Vat.lat. 6852 (Fig. 9).²⁴ The new script is disseminated in Rome in particular by Bartolomeo Sanvito (1437-1511) from the early 1460s onwards.²⁵ The Florentine model was finally eliminated by the 1480s. Print characters were to derive from the Northern *antiqua*, the *italica* and the restored Classical capitals.



Fig. 9 Felice Feliciano, Vat.lat. 6852, f. 1.
By permission of the Vatican Library

²² For Schiavone, see Shaw & Shaw 2003, and the controversial figure of Squarcione, Tolley 2003, and De Robertis 2020 538.

²³ De Robertis 2020, 538.

²⁴ Also known as *Alphabetum Romanum* (a title not figuring in the manuscript), see https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.lat.6852, 14 September 2023. For the manuscript, see Feliciano 1985, 22-36, and on Feliciano's hand, De Robertis 2019, 540, 544.

²⁵ For Sanvito, see De la Mare & Nuvoloni 2009; concisely, De Robertis 2019, 538-543.

4. The tomb of Cosimo the Elder (c. 1468)

Cosimo the Elder's (1389-1464) funeral monument by Andrea del Verrocchio (1435-1488)²⁶ belongs to this period of transition. Andrea designed it between 1465 and 1467. Cosimo's tumulation took place on 22 October 1465.

Cosimo's monument was built in front of the high altar of S. Lorenzo, with a multi-coloured (imperial porphyry, white marble, green serpentine and bronze) arrangement featuring two inscriptions placed in classicising *tabulae ansatae*, on the one hand, and in the crypt below, on the other, where a sarcophagus with an inscription seems to carry out the same function of sustaining the church as Cosimo's parents' monument and actual burial place did.²⁷ Cosimo had furthermore secured exclusive burial rights in the central nave, thus maximising the visibility of the upper part of his monument.²⁸ Upon the Republican revolution of 9 November 1494, when the Medici were exiled from Florence, part of the upper inscription (*decreto publico // pater patriae*, by public decree, father of his country), suffered a *damnatio memoriae*, only to be restored on the return of the Medici in 1512, again eliminated in 1528 and restored after their definitive return in 1530.²⁹



Fig. 10 The central nave of S. Lorenzo. Photo S. Bauer, Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.5 Generic

²⁶ For Andrea del Verrocchio, see Even 2003 and Grassi 1961.

²⁷ Davies 2019, 18.

²⁸ Davies 2019, 28.

²⁹ Kragelund 2021, 131-134; for the events of November 1494 and their consequences, see e.g. Merisalo 1999.



Fig. 11 The subterranean part of Cosimo the Elder's tomb. Photo <https://palazzo-medici.it/mediateca>. Public domain

The lower part of the monument, supporting the central nave floor, is a sarcophagus with an inscription on a *tabula ansata*: PETRVS MEDICES // PATRI // FACIENDVM CVRAVIT (Pietro de' Medici had [this monument] made for his father).³⁰ The spacing is relatively regular and the lettering consists of regular capitals with an attempt at shading through thicker lines but without serifs.³¹ As in Giovanni di Bicci's and Piccarda di Edoardo's inscriptions, there is a high *M* (l. 1), but also, more classically, an *M* with the central strokes touching the base line (l. 3). Consequently, and expectedly,

³⁰ Kragelund 2021, 134.

³¹ As the late Marco Buonocore pointed out at the colloquium, *P* and *R* are typically Republican, not Imperial.

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the capitals are still of the traditional Florentine style, with but little evidence of the cutting-edge Northern style.

The upper, sixteenth-century inscriptions are again eminently classicising in form, *COSMVS MEDICES // HIC SITVS EST // DECRETO PVBLICO // PATER PATRIAE* (Cosimo de' Medici lies here, by public decree, father of his country) and *VIXIT // ANNOS LXXV // MENSES III // DIES XX* (he lived for 75 years, 3 months, 20 days). *Decreto publico* might refer either to the classical burial formula *hic situs est*, reminiscent of Pompey's tomb, among others, or to *pater patriae*, a hallowed Roman title accorded to such heroes as Camillus and Cicero, and which the state bestowed upon the late Cosimo in 1465.³² It is no wonder that the title should have been eliminated after the first overthrow of the Medici.³³



Fig. 12 The upper part of the tomb, with the inscription, presented as a *tabula ansata*, datable to after 1530 in regular sixteenth-century capitals. Photo Sailko, Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported

³² For the title, see Kent 2009, and parallels, Kragelund 2021, 133.

³³ Kragelund 2021, 134 and n. 217.

5. The tomb (1469-1473) of Piero di Cosimo (1416-1469) and Giovanni di Cosimo (1421-1453)

The monument to Cosimo the Elder's sons, Piero and Giovanni, was also designed by Andrea del Verrocchio 1469-1473 and placed in the wall between the *Cappella delle reliquie* (or the chapel of Saints Cosmas and Damian) and the *Sagrestia Vecchia*, and consequently highly visible.³⁴ Again, typically for Andrea, the monument is multi-coloured with porphyry, white and green serpentine marble as well as elements in bronze.³⁵ There are inscriptions on both sides. Palaeographically, the monument harks back to the Florentine tradition, although with some elements possibly pointing to awareness of the new, Northern style.

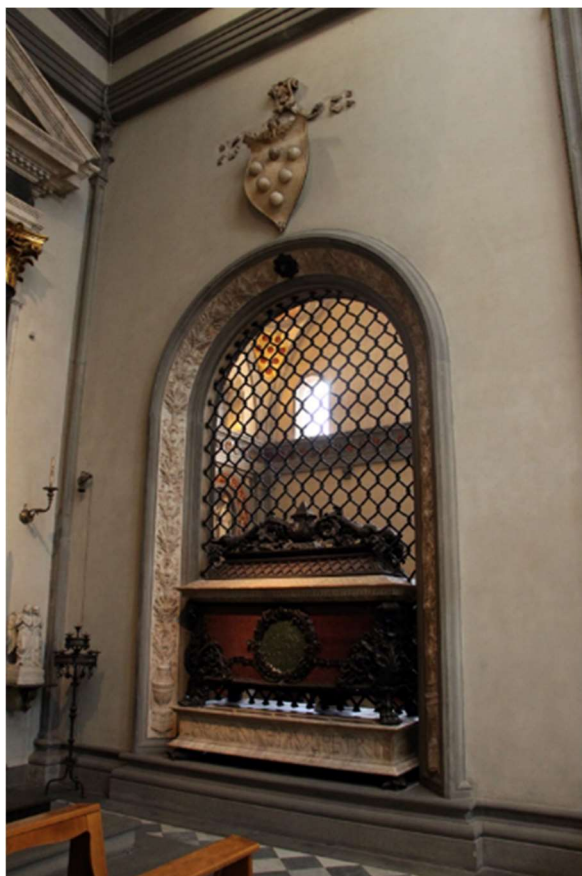


Fig. 13 Piero and Giovanni di Cosimo's tomb. Photo P. Kragelund

³⁴ Davies 2019, 28.

³⁵ For Andrea's use of colours and materials, see Even 2003.

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The formula-wise eminently classicising upper inscription on the side towards the *Cappella delle reliquie* is placed in a round shield of serpentine marble with an oak wreath in bronze. The spacing is again relatively regular, and the lettering presents traditional capitals with attempt at shading and devoid of serifs: PETRO // ET IOHANNI DE // MEDICIS // COSMI P(atris) P(atriciae) F(iliis) // H(oc) M(onumentum) H(aeredem) N(on) S(equetur) (To Piero and Giovanni de' Medici, sons of Cosimo father of his country. This monument will not go to the heir).³⁶ The inscription running round the white marble base is palaeographically somewhat nearer to the new, Northern style, in classicising capitals with an attempt at shading but still without serifs: (1) LAVRENT(ius) ET IVL(ianus) PETRI F(ili) (2) POSVER(unt) (3) PATRI PATRVO QVE (4) MCCCCLXXII [Lorenzo and Giuliano sons of Piero erected (this monument) to their father and uncle in 1472].



Fig. 14 Detail of the tomb in the *Cappella delle reliquie*. Photo P. Kragelund

³⁶ Kragelund 2021, 134-135.



Fig. 15 The tomb from the *Sagrestia vecchia* side. Photo P. Kragelund

The upper, formula-wise classicising inscription is again placed in a round shield in serpentine marble with an oak wreath in bronze: PET(rus) VIX(it) // AN(nos) LIII M(enses) V D(ies) XV // IOHAN(nes) // AN(nos) XLII M(enses) IIII // D(ies) XXVIII (Piero lived for 53 years, 5 months, 15 days, Giovanni 42 years, 4 months, 28 days). The spacing is relatively regular, and the lettering consists of traditional capitals with attempt at shading, again without serifs. For the base, see above, (3) and (4).

6. Conclusion

From the 1410s onwards, there is evidence for Florentine experimentation of monumental use of epigraphic capitals. The models for the antiqua book script were eleventh- and twelfth-century manuscripts, whereas those for inscriptions even went back to the Carolingian age and exhibited great variation in the first decades of the century. Giovanni di Bicci and Piccarda di Edoardo's sarcophagus, just as Cosimo the Elder's monument, present the expected traditional lettering, with increasingly classicising elements of

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presentation, as yet untouched by the antiquarian innovations of 1450-1460s Northern Italy, which restored the fully geometric classical monumental capitals, adopted the classical abbreviations and ancient formulae. Thanks to mobile Northern scribes, such as Bartolomeo Sanvito, the Northern style was disseminated in Central Italy, gaining Rome in the 1460s. Florence offered more resistance, which is visible in the inscriptions of the sarcophagus of Piero and Giovanni di Cosimo, which essentially represent traditional lettering with only few elements pointing to the new trend. In the early 1470s, the Northern style had indeed not yet eliminated the Florentine epigraphical style. The Medici monuments described above are in stark contrast to the inscription, datable to 1495, on the base of Donatello's statue of Judith and Holophernes from 1455-1457/1460?, which represents the fully-fledged Augustan-type geometrical capitals as described by Felice Feliciano.



Fig. 17 Donatello, Judith and Holophernes, 1455-1457/1460? Inscription from 1495. Florence, Palazzo Vecchio. Photo O. Merisalo.

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