



Fig. 1. Early 7th c. BCE. Marsiliana d'Albegna, Circolo degli Avori Tumulus. Ivory and gold leaf. Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze. Actual size (8.5 x 5.1 cm). Author's photo. Drawing by Pandolfini 1990: 20.

Responding to Historical Context

The Marsiliana tablet (Fig. 1) and the letter of Vietnamese proselyte Igesico Văn Tín (Fig. 2) are among the oldest examples of a “proto”-Latin script written by native inhabitants of their respective lands. In central Italy, many individuals interacted with novel writing practices introduced by the Etruscans, who themselves had adopted Euboean writing practices; in Vietnam, the incursions of French Jesuits brought with them the Latin alphabet, and individuals there faced a similar scenario. The graphic style of Văn Tín is characterized by loose placement of tones and diacritics, including his own signature. The Etruscan-made Marsiliana abecedarium, since it is a grave good, communicates how significant it was to the deceased. The frame itself is made of valuable materials sure to impress those attending the burial, and the inscription on the frame also emphasizes the individual value placed on possessing or acquiring literacy. The tablet, due to its diminutive size, may also have been used as an amulet, something that would increase its importance for the wearer’s identity. The ways in which these objects convey personal significance offer two potential options for constructing a comprehensible personal identity in the face of great historical contexts: personal signs and signatures, or personal uses and applications.

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Abstract and Methods

This project explores how individual writing practices interact with the identities of writers in the early development of the Latin script. Two periods of cultural contact elucidate this: 7th-to-4th c. BCE central Italy, and 17th c. CE Vietnam, where Jesuit missionaries were modifying the Latin script for representing the Vietnamese language in the form of *chữ Quốc ngữ* (“National language script”). For Italy there are four case studies of inscribed objects: three abecedaria and one stele. For Vietnam, there are two unbound manuscripts: one catechetical record by Jesuit clergy and one personal letter by a Vietnamese proselyte. In keeping with the definition of Boyes et al., for whom writing is “an element of social practice within a given cultural environment” (2021: 2), I employ a cultural approach to these texts. I identify not only what the inscription is, but also what it does. Through autopsy, I get at their materiality, something which necessarily affects how object and inscription interact. Putting these textual artefacts in conversation with each other, I propose that three common uses of writing emerge from them: responding to historical context, evoking orality, and religious commemoration.

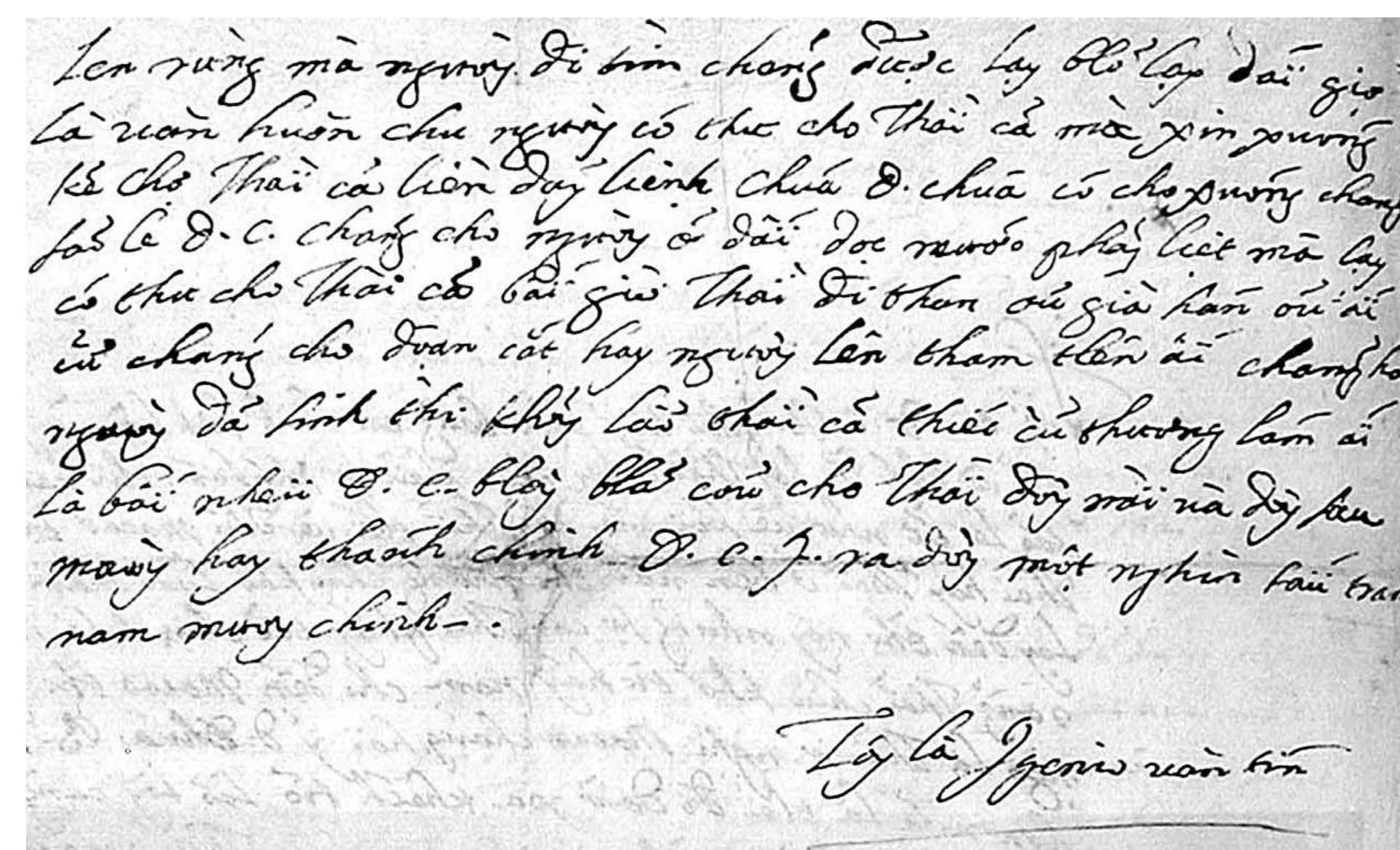


Fig. 2. Letter. September 12th, 1659. Paper and ink. 18 x 27 cm. ARSI Jap-Sin vol 80, f.247v. Official reproduction.



Fig. 3. Late 7th c. BCE. Monte Aguzzo tumulus. Bucchero. Inscribed post-firing. 17.8 x 8 cm. Museo Nazionale Etrusco. Author's photo. Drawing by Pandolfini 1990: 25. “Velthur made me” underlined.

Speaking Signatures

This bucchero amphora (Fig. 3) contains among its many inscriptions a signature (“Velthur made me”). Writing in the ancient world was meant to be read aloud, and phrases using the first person are endowed with particular force. Signed in this manner, the amphora’s speech is “activated” by the reader’s participation. Văn Tín’s letter (Fig. 2) also contains a signature using the first person (“I am Igesico Văn Tín”). His use of the first person involves himself in the historical context in which he is situated, and also involves the reader in renewing his identity. It is unknown whether this formula was common, but fellow proselyte Bento Thiện, whose letter is paired with Văn Tín’s in the archive, does not sign in a similar fashion. Văn Tín speaks throughout his letter, but it is with his signature that he most decisively affirms himself. Văn Tín and Velthur continue to exist through the objects that speak for them.

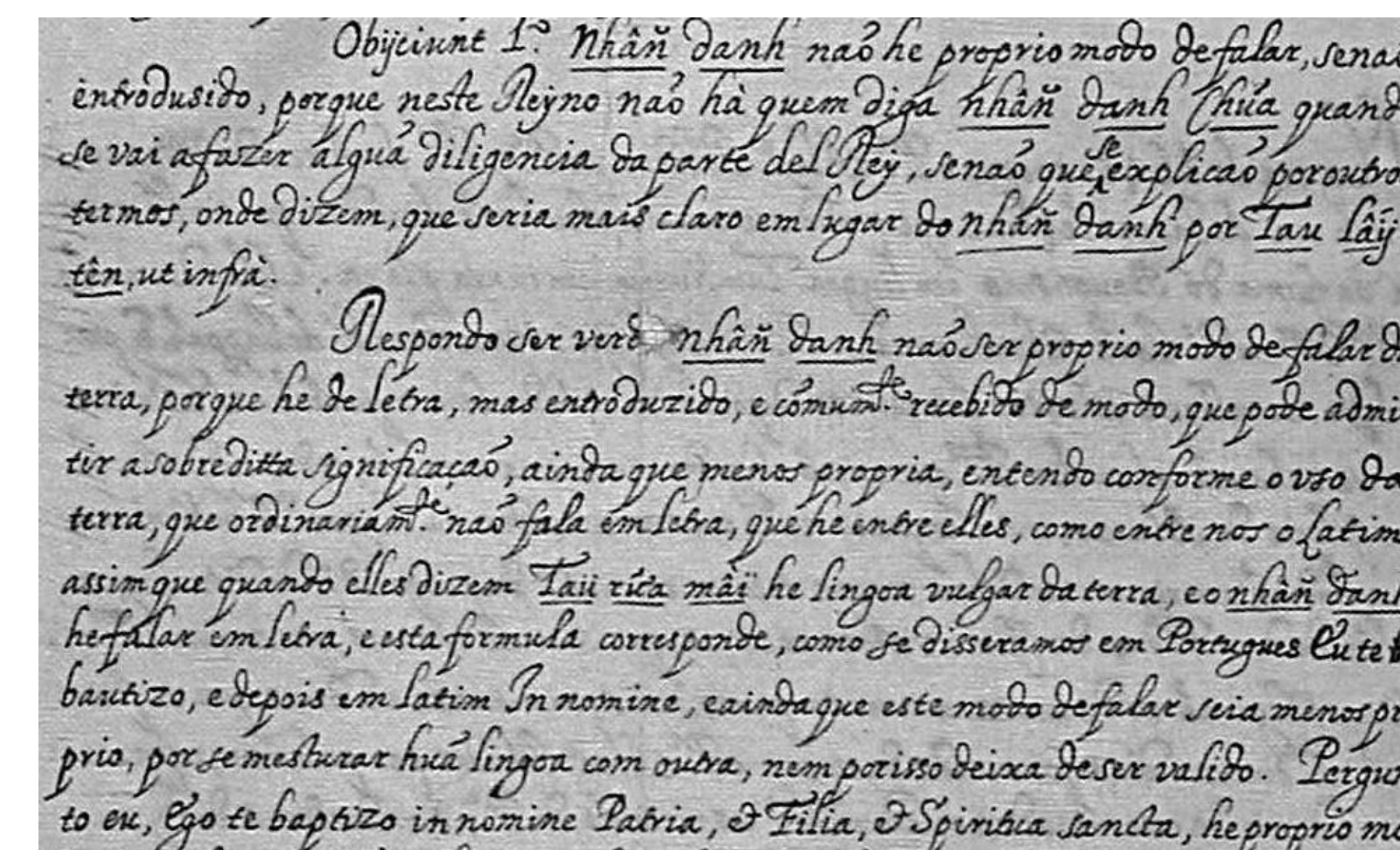


Fig. 4. “Manoscritto”, em que se prova, que a forma do Baptismo pronunciada em lingua Annamica he verdadeira”. Paper and ink. 20.25 x 27 cm. ARSI Jap-Sin vol 81, f.35v. 1654. Official reproduction.

Fig. 5. Late 7th c. BCE. Veio, Casale del Fosso necropolis. Figulina clay. Painted pre-firing. 5.5 x 6.5 cm. Museo Nazionale Etrusco. Author's photo. Drawing by Buranelli 1993: 317.

Reading Aloud

The 1654 “Manoscritto” (Fig. 4) details a 1645 debate on the proper translation of a baptismal formula into *Quốc ngữ* (underlined). The baptismal formula is meant to be read aloud: baptism, much like the entire practice of catechism, revolves around vocalized repetition. In addition, the scribe likely would have read the entire work aloud during copying. This is equally true of the text of the Etruscan lenticular aryballos (Fig. 5) painted with a partial abecedarium. As inscriptions would have been read aloud, one can easily imagine the scribe of the aryballos sounding out the letters as they painted them on its surface. Given the unusual form of some of the letters, this poses an interesting challenge, but the appearance of the aryballos is the message, and the message is necessarily an oral one.

Conclusions

Both sets of textual artefacts share many similarities beyond employing the Latin script for use in their writing. The texts in question are bounded by physical concerns which necessarily shape the ways in which their messages find their fullest expression. Any minute differences in scripts reflect large-scale changes within whole communities and individual acts of agency. The latter is instrumental in providing a window into the lives of ordinary writers, on their own terms and for their own ends. It is with this in mind that one can best appreciate that the Latin script has remained an effective tool for writers everywhere precisely because it has been influenced by every one of them. Thank you for participating in the renewal of these texts along with me.



Fig. 6. 6th c. BCE. Comitium of Roman Forum. Tuff. 47 x 52 x 61 cm. Plaster cast in Museo Nazionale Romano alle Terme di Diocleziano. Author's photo. Drawing by Cristofani 1990: 58.

Religious Commemoration

The Lapis Niger cippus (Fig. 6) is considered the oldest Latin inscription in stone, and likely demarcated a sacred space. Although publicly displayed, its text employs a bizarre mix of horizontal and vertical boustrophedon, rendering it difficult for spectators to sound out or interact with. Conversely, the records of the “Manoscritto” (Fig. 4) are fairly lucid, but were probably not meant for public use: Jesuit operations were quite insular, and keeping minutes is out of habit more than strict utility. These two objects exemplify preservation for preservation’s sake, an example of the epigraphic habit, an investment in “inserting [oneself] into the collective memory of their community” (Beltrán Lloris 2015: 145). One marks a sacred spot because it is important; one preserves the minutes of a meeting for the same reason. Nine years from the time of the meeting, copies of records were still being made, demonstrating that a culture of recordkeeping was as alive and well. The two documents are markers of ritual, of religious orthodoxy and its importance to the communities in question.