

**Abstract – Painted Crosses and the Trajectories of Medieval Image Captions. Evidence from the Thirteenth-Century Zadar and Beyond** – The far-ranging networks of texts and objects, from Scandinavia to the Mediterranean, draw this study to the Dalmatian city of Zadar, and, from there, expands its scope to examine extensive material to address the issue of the interplay between text and image in devotional contexts. The paper focuses especially on a group of thirteenth-century painted crosses in Zadar and their striking verse inscriptions. Expanding long-lived debate about the *Rex obit* verse inscribed on one of the Zadar crosses, and a dozen other Deposition and Crucifixion depictions, the paper presents pan-European evidence for the display of simple double-rimmed formulae as image captions, with special emphasis on monumental crosses, whether painted, sculpted in wood, or cast in bronze.

**Keywords** – Rex obit verse, Zadar, crosses, image captions, thirteenth century

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# Painted Crosses and the Trajectories of Medieval Image Captions

Evidence from Thirteenth-Century Zadar and Beyond

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The early to mid-twelfth century pier relief of Deposition from the Cross in the cloister of the Silos monastery has been puzzling scholars of medieval art ever since Meyer Schapiro's seminal article appeared in print little over eighty years ago [Fig. 1]<sup>1</sup>. It was not only the discussion of iconography or artistic kinship of the work from Schapiro's pen that initiated the long-lasting scholarly fascination but the short leonine verse that crowns the relief, reading: "He dies, she cries, the beloved one grieves, the impious one prays". Back then – aware of another analogous verse paired with the late twelfth-century tympanum relief of

the same subject at the cathedral in Ribe, Denmark [Fig. 2] – scholars were striving to understand the unexpected occurrence of the same inscription

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<sup>1</sup> Meyer Schapiro, "From Mozarabic to Romanesque in Silos", *Art Bulletin*, XXI/4 (1939), pp. 313–374, sp. pp. 364–365.



in such distant parts of the Continent<sup>2</sup>. It was certainly beyond their expectations that the *fortuna* of this verse would prove to be so rich and diverse, not only geographically speaking, but also in terms of its use as an image caption in devotional practices of medieval times.

Fast-forward to 2009. The merit of enumerating the known occurrences of this verse as a caption goes to Peter Scott Brown who greatly enriched the discussion on this seemingly simple verse<sup>3</sup>. Brown followed in Schapiro's footsteps, and then making the Silos his point of departure, went on to analyse the inscription's remarkable dissemination within the "pan-European frontier in the study of word and image"<sup>4</sup>. He counted nine examples of this rimmed verse (including manuscripts and monumental sculpture alike), some of which vary slightly from the one on the Silos Deposition. The Silos inscription reads *Hic obit, hec plorat, carus dolet, impius orat*, while most other comparable inscriptions substitute the initial *Hic* (He) for *Rex* (the king).

Not long afterwards, the corpus of objects bearing the line was further enlarged. Today, to the best of my knowledge, no less than twelve occurrences of the verse have been found. New additions to Brown's list are two manuscripts of French provenance, and a large cross from the eastern Adriatic city of Zadar, measuring 225 × 175 cm [Fig. 3]<sup>5</sup>. The new impetus that Brown's essay has provided, together with the accretions to the heterogeneous corpus of objects bearing the same pious formula, stimulate further reflections upon this matter. My intention here, however, is not to widen the discussion by introducing new, hitherto unknown instances of identical inscriptions, but rather, to build upon the latest addition to this burgeoning group – that of the monumental crucifix – and to steer the discussion in a somewhat different direction. Admittedly, the employment of one double rhymed verse on a painted cross provides an exemplary case study for addressing the issue of the devotional and liturgical potential of these large panels. This is a popular topic in recent research and, although the role that crosses performed in religious rituals seems self-evident, rarely can they be connected to precise liturgical and devotional texts<sup>6</sup>.

The appearance of the cross from Zadar on the variegated and fascinating horizon of the objects employing the *Rex obit* verse, therefore, has important implications for the study of the exact liturgical and devotional purposes to which these large objects were put by medieval religious communities. To that end, in this paper, the latest addition to the devotional landscape will serve as the point at which the pan-European subject narrows down to the local, Zaratine context. Therefore, this paper includes in its consideration two more monumental crucifixes belonging to the city's medieval heritage. Both these crucifixes display equally eye-catching inscriptions on their crosspieces. This rather rare feature formed the core of the local tradition of fashioning specific types of crosses whose "texts" go well beyond customary abbreviations of *titulus crucis*<sup>7</sup>.

- 2 Erik Fischer, "Note on a Possible Relation between Silos and the Cathedral of Ribe in the XIIth Century", *Classica et Mediaevalia*, XI (1947), pp. 216–230, sp. p. 228 proposed that pilgrims would have bridged the thousand plus miles from Silos to Ribe.
- 3 Peter S. Brown, "The Verse Inscription from the Deposition Relief at Santo Domingo de Silos: Word, Image, and Act in Medieval Art", *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies*, 1/1 (2009), pp. 87–111.
- 4 *Ibidem*, p. 89.
- 5 For introductory assessments of these instances, see Niels T. Sterum, "REX OBIT, HEC FLORAT... Tympanonindskriften over Ribe Domkirkes Kathoveddør og indskriftens fortsættelse", *Aarbøger for nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie*, (2010), pp. 173–184, sp. pp. 180–181; and Matko M. Marušić, "Verses of Faith and Devotion. Seeing, Reading and Touching Monumental Crucifixes with Inscriptions (12th–13th Century)", *Studia Ceranea*, VI (2016), pp. 397–421, sp. pp. 404–405.
- 6 See, among others, Stefano D'Ovidio, "Spazio liturgico e rappresentazione del sacro: crocifissi monumentali d'età romanica a Napoli e in Campania", *Hortus Artium Medievalium*, XX/2 (2014), pp. 753–762; Katharina Ch. Schüppel, "Medieval Painted Crosses in Italy: Perspectives of Research", in *Envisioning Christ on the Cross: Ireland and the Early Medieval West*, Juliet Mullins, Jenifer Ní Ghrádaigh, Richard Hawtree eds, Dublin 2013, pp. 248–261; Herbert L. Kessler, "Inscriptions on Painted Crosses and the Spaces of Personal and Communal Meditation", *Acta ad archaeologiam et artium historiam pertinentia*, XXIV (2011), pp. 161–184; Donal Cooper, "Projecting Presence: the Monumental Cross in Italian Church Interior", in *Presence: The Inherence of the Prototype within Images and Other Objects*, Robert Maniura, Rupert Shepherd eds, Burlington/Aldershot 2005, pp. 47–69; Joanna Cannon, "The Era of the Great Painted Crucifix: Giotto, Cimabue, Giunta Pisano, and Their Anonymous Contemporaries", *Renaissance Studies*, XVI/4 (2002), pp. 571–581.
- 7 For an instructive overview of the sources and meaning of the *titulus*, see Anna Pontani, "Note sull'esegesi e l'iconografia del *Titulus Crucis*", *Aevum*, LXXVII/1 (2003), pp. 137–186.

1/ Deposition from the Cross, pier relief in the monastic cloister, Abbey of San Domingo de Silos, ca 1120–1150

2/ Deposition from the Cross, tympanum over the lateral entrance, Cathedral of Our Lady María, Ribe, ca 1180–1200

3/ Crucifix, Church of St Michael, Zadar, ca 1250



The present paper aims to examine the lettering of these crosses that overlay the painted motifs with “additional symbolic resonances”<sup>8</sup>, because their simple rimmed lines did not only explain the iconography but acted as vehicles of prayer. By perpetuating the equal display of verses parallel to the arms of Christ, Zaratine commissioners were constantly changing the message written on their crosses – the potent lines voiced and uttered by the beholders who prayed before them. These *symbolic resonances* are here understood not only as mere local reflections of the pious lines and prayers known throughout medieval Europe and employed as image captions<sup>9</sup>. They, indeed, testify to the “shared belief in the power of the written word”<sup>10</sup>. However, for the argument in this paper, more stimulating is the insight they offer into the medieval communities’ responses to the text written on their most revered holy objects.

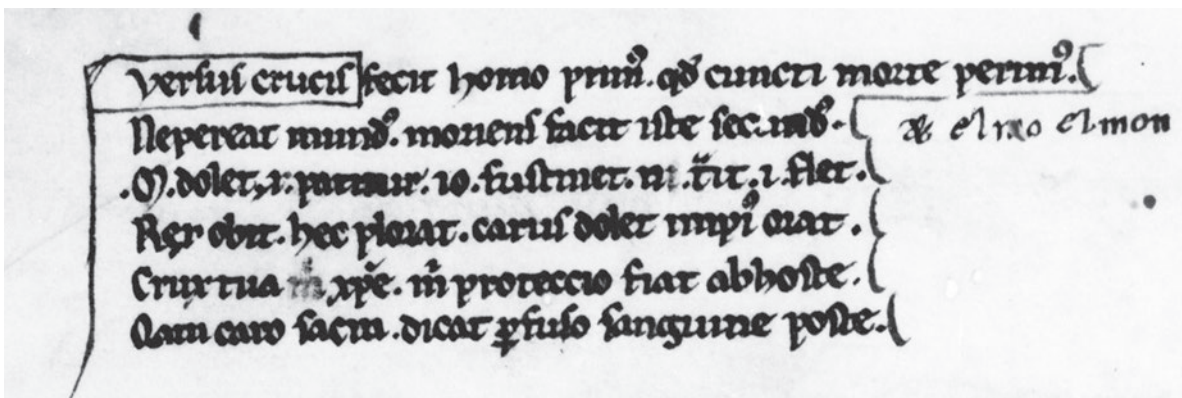
***Rex obit [...] impius orat:***  
**A question of origin**

In his 2009 publication, Brown argued that the inscription on the Silos Deposition follows the opening verse of a short, eight-verse Eucharistic poem that appears in the twelfth-century miscellany now treasured in the Copenhagen University Library (MS Fabr. 81, fol. 25r). Originally, it belonged to the Benedictine monastery of Sts Cosmas and Damian in Liesborn, in Westphalia<sup>11</sup>. As Brown pointed out, the final line of the poem reveals its reading on the occasion of the celebration of an unknown Virgin’s feast. Furthermore, the word *sumite*, the plural imperative of verb *sumo*

(to take, assume) addresses the congregation at the ceremony in which the poem was vocalized. Recognizing other motifs from the poem in the Deposition imagery at Silos, Brown interpreted the relief as an ekphrasis of the *Rex obit* octave<sup>12</sup>.

Brown proposed that the verse and the imagery in Silos evoked the poem: the vocalisation of the inscription was followed by the recitation of the subsequent lines<sup>13</sup>. He was undoubtedly right in underscoring the eloquence of the Silos relief. What still awaits further reflections are the implications of its devotional and liturgical context, such as to understand how an indisputably Eucharistic poem resonated with a pier relief in the cloister to which no altar seems to have been attached. The mimetic capacity of the assembly of text and imagery on the Silos relief, moreover, led Brown to speculate on the damage to Christ’s feet, abrasion that he interpreted as the sign of touching, a devotional gesture of submission and humility, which, according to his scheme, constituted a final component of the tripartite devotional performance – that of the text, image, and the act<sup>14</sup>.

The arguments succinctly summarized here, have not been universally accepted. Indeed, such an attempt to link the *Rex obit* poem with the *Hic obit* verse on the pier relief in Silos does not fully answer the rather complex question of medieval conceptions of text. Indeed, medieval poetry circulated in various forms and under different names. The verses enjoyed large circulation and were often elaborated upon or reworked, therefore their “origin” is usually impossible to trace<sup>15</sup>. Besides the variability and fluidity of medieval



literature, “false attributions” to Church fathers and prolific writers is another feature of poetry production of the time<sup>16</sup>. The *Hic obit* line in Silos is a case in point because the verse occurred in manuscripts independently from the poem in the Copenhagen Miscellany; attached to codices as scribal notes or as being part of completely different poems<sup>17</sup>. More significant for the argument of this paper, the verse was not exclusively connected to Eucharistic or festive celebrations but could also have been used in liturgically non-specific prayers to the cross. In this respect, the most telling example is the rhymed prayer written before the well-known treatise *Summa de ecclesiasticis officiis* by the medieval liturgist Johannes Beleth (a recent addition to Brown’s list). The twelfth-century copy of Beleth’s *Summa*, written in the early 1160s (BNF, MS lat. 714, fol. 1v), contains the poem laid out on the initial folio of the codex (in no specific relation to Beleth’s works), introduced by the rubric *Versus crucis* (verses of the cross)<sup>18</sup>. The famed *Rex obit* line is not used as the initial verse, nor is it given any specific prominence [Fig. 4]<sup>19</sup>.

*sanguinis sancitur et agni / per carnis culpam mortem gustaverat  
Adam / per panis speciem passuram sumite carnem / iste sapor  
vivi fluxit de vulnere Christi. / Unaquaque die celebremus festa  
Marie”. This codex, in which the poem is preserved, was  
produced in Liège. The poem was attributed to Hildebert  
of Lavardin, or one of his followers. See Brown, “The Verse  
Inscription” (n. 3), p. 88.*

12 *Ibidem*, pp. 95–96.

13 *Ibidem*, p. 96.

14 *Ibidem*, pp. 101–102. Interpretation of the wear of lower part of the relief has been questioned for there exist similar abrasions on other reliefs that were not caused by constant touching of the objects, but by mechanic damages. See Elizabeth Valdez del Álamo, *A Palace of the Mind: the Cloister of Silos and Spanish Sculpture*, Turnhout 2012, p. 100, n. 339.

15 The Copenhagen *Rex obit* poem was accepted as an indisputable provenance of image captions. See Alessio Monciatti, “Un frustolo disegnato. Lucca, Biblioteca Statale, ms. 370, c. 102”, in “Conosco un ottimo storico dell’arte...” *Per Enrico Castelnuovo. Scritti di allievi e amici pisani*, Maria M. Donato, Massimo Ferretti eds, Pisa 2012, pp. 43–50, sp. p. 43; Marušić, “Verses of Faith” (n. 5), pp. 404–405; (for Silos) disproved by Valdez del Álamo, *A Palace of the Mind* (n. 14), p. 97, n. 322.

16 Thomas H. Bestul, *Texts of the Passion: Latin Devotional Literature and Medieval Society*, Philadelphia 1996, pp. 12–14.

17 For instance, the late 12th-century manuscript from the Zürich’s Zentralbibliothek contains a couplet of the *Rex obit* line, followed by a rhetorically comparable verse absent from the Copenhagen poem (*Derogat hic, gemit hec, obit is, dolet hic, rogat iste*). On the other hand, the *Rex obit* verse could have been paired with the second line of the Copenhagen poem, divorced from the rest of the text, as is attested by the scribal note in the codex containing Guibert de Nogent’s writings. This doublet is penned after his *Liber de laude sanctae Mariae* and preceding a set of three epistles *de amicitia* by Seneca. See *Codices Regimenses latini*, vol. I: *Codices 1–250*, Andreas Wilmart ed., Vatican City 1937, p. 557.

18 For the different meanings of *versi* in liturgical and devotional writings of medieval times, see Vincent Debiais, “Carolingian Verse Inscriptions and Images: From Aesthetics to Efficiency”, *Convivium*, 1/2 (2014), pp. 88–101, sp. pp. 98–99.

19 The prayer is followed by other shorter texts, most notably the twelve verses on the Three Marys. See *Iohannis Beleth. Summa de ecclesiasticis officiis* [Corpus Christianorum. Continuatio Mediaevalis 41A], Herbert Douteil ed., Turnhout 1976, p. 175. The *Rex obit* verse was in a similar fashion incorporated in a larger portion text in a 13th-century manuscript now in Madrid (Biblioteca Nacional de España, MS 4319, fols 53v–54r); Sterum, “REX OBIT” (n. 5), pp. 180, 182.

8 Robert A. Maxwell, Kirk Ambrose, “Introduction: Romanesque Sculpture Studies at a Crossroads”, in *Current Directions in Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Sculpture Studies*, *idem* eds, Turnhout 2010, pp. 1–22, sp. p. 14.

9 Most fully addressed by Herbert L. Kessler, *Neither God nor Man. Words, Images, and Medieval Anxiety about Art*, Freiburg im Breisgau 2007, pp. 9, 13, 39. Kessler is particularly interested in “medieval picture captions and the bearing these have on the making, interpretation and function of medieval art”, and this is precisely the line I intend to pursue in this paper.

10 Kaja M. Haug Hagen, “*Crux Christi Sit Mecum*: Devotion to the Apotropaic Cross”, *Religions*, x/630 (2019), pp. 13–14.

11 The poem reads: “*Rex obit, hec plorat, carus dolet, impius orat / sol fugit, astra tremunt, pavet hostis, corpora surgunt. / In cruce Christus obit, sepelitur et inde resurgit / corpus in hoc magni*



5/ Crucifixion with a praying cleric, *Sacramentary of Santi Apostoli*, ca 1090 / Biblioteca Riccardiana (Florence), MS 299, f. 106v

6/ Christ Enthroned, *De laudibus Sanctae Crucis*, ca 1100 (text possibly ca 1150) / Biblioteca Statale (Lucca), MS 370, f. 102r

Considering other pairings of the verse with images show that it is difficult to link the *Rex obit* verse with a specific poem. Arguably, the earliest depiction that was captioned with this verse is the late eleventh-century sacramentary Crucifixion scene that includes a kneeling cleric, which was used (as attested by the note at the end of the codex) for the consecration of the Roman church of Santi Apostoli, now in the Biblioteca Riccardiana, Florence (MS. 299, fol. 106v). Here the *Rex obit* verse, displayed right next to the genuflected cleric, is preceded by another inscription that runs below the arms of Christ, written in the form of a dialogue between the Virgin Mary and Christ, a short extract from a *sacra rappresentazione* [Fig. 5]<sup>20</sup>. Another complicating case appears in the Deposition from Codex 370 (fols 102r–v) in Lucca’s Biblioteca Statale. Alessio Monciatti has confirmed the French provenance of the manuscript by dating its imagery to around 1100, whereas the inscriptions were – to judge from their palaeography – added later, in the second half of the twelfth century. The scene in question was a part of a codex of the widely known *De laudibus Sanctae Crucis*, by Rabanus Maurus, and was arguably used for personal devotion<sup>21</sup>. The Deposition [Fig. 7], displayed on verso of the first folio, was preceded by an image of Christ Enthroned [Fig. 6], which was also embellished by the surrounding text. The figure of Christ is ensconced among twelve penitential psalms, while the passage below contains detailed instructions for praying before the image of Savior by voicing the above-written psalms<sup>22</sup>. Turning the page, the penitent finds the image of the Deposition accompanied by the *Rex obit* verse.

20 The text reads as follows: *Fili – Quid mater? – Deus est? – Sum – Cur ita pendes? – Ut saluem gentes sua crimina fonte luentes.* Melania Ceccanati, *Il sorriso della sfinge: l’eredità del mondo antico nelle miniature riccardiane*, Florence 2009, pp. 44–45.

21 Monciatti, “Un frustolo disegnato” (n. 15), p. 48.

22 “*Si istos XII psalmos XXIIII vicibus cum gemitu et vera penitentiae conversione praemisso ordine decantaveris integrum annum in pane et aqua vivendi redimere poteris, et maxime episcopus. In ipsa enim manuum extensione Crux depignitur. Atque Ideo elevatis manibus orare praecipimur, ut ipso quoque membrorum gestu passionem domini fateamur. Tunc enim citius exanditur nostra oratio cum Christum quem mens loquitur corpus imitarunt. Hoc etiam exemplo sanctus Moyses contra Amalech cum bellum gereret non arcu non ferro, sed elevatis ad deum manibus superavit. Sic enim habes scriptum. Cum elevaret manus moyses.*” Full transcription in *ibidem*, p. 48, n. 9.







Recebit Hæc plorat Carus dolet Impius orat

The evidence presented, most of which was already laid out in Brown's essay, testifies to different occasions on which the same inscription could have been used. With all this in mind, the reconstruction of the origin of the Silos inscription can be called into question, as Elizabeth Valdez del Álamo has already rightly noted<sup>23</sup>. An attempt to find a single source for the inscription, which would then trigger the *repetitio* of the following lines of the poems as a mnemonic strategy, is to some extent overly narrow. Indeed, such schemes (comparable to the medieval approaches to the text) did not necessarily aim at petrifying newly inspired poems of specific verses for their posterity<sup>24</sup>. Verses over a century old could have been reworked and displayed on newly crafted objects. The very same words, and their trajectories through space and time of medieval Europe, were in such a way constantly rephrasing devotional practices in which the verse was used. Explaining the breadth of their chronological and geographical dispersal is the main challenge for researchers.

Considering these diverse pious contexts, what is worth noting here is that the Zaratine cross is the only *Rex obit* (monumental) object thus far discovered located inside a church, once probably mounted above the rood screen or attached to an altar. Further archival research could shed light on its biography and original setting<sup>25</sup>. Moreover, the inscription, with reference to the depicted figures, does not merely frame the imagery at its upper or lower edge (as on other Crucifixion and Deposition scenes)<sup>26</sup>, but it is its integral part. The line on the cross is aligned with the arms of Christ and is broken down in two in such a way that His body forms the main caesura of the rimmed inscription<sup>27</sup>. One was then first to observe the suffering body of Christ and the tears of the Virgin (the figure is, unfortunately, obliterated on the left end of the cross), indicated in the first part of the verse inscription, which is followed by the words accrediting John the Evangelist "the beloved one grieves". The twisting rivulets of blood running from the wounds on Christ's palms nailed above the first and the last word of the inscription, mark its linear, reader-friendly arrangement by associating the words *Rex* (Christ) and *orat* (the praying devotee) by way of the dripping blood.

In the case of the Crucifixion from the Riccardiana Sacramentary, the *impius orat*, a rather ambiguous phrase ending the verse, was personified in the figure of the praying cleric [Fig. 5]. In iconographically more complex depictions – such as the Silos Deposition [Fig. 1] or the Ribe tympanum [Fig. 2] – scholars have proposed different readings of the word *impius* by employing theological arguments for connecting other figures from the Crucifixion with this phrase<sup>28</sup>. However, a more straightforward explanation would be that the *impius* in the verse was identified with the *impious viewer* who uttered the words displayed on the cross. The eyes of the beholder are guided by the text, inviting him or her to cross-check the words with the depicted figures. In this meditative engagement with the words and imagery, the path to salvation is disclosed at the end of the inscribed verse; it is the act of praying, as is also meticulously described on the initial folio of the Lucchese copy of Rabanus' *De laudibus* [Fig. 6]. Golden letters of the verse on the cross from Zadar had both a practical as well as a symbolical aim. While on the one hand they rendered the verse visible under the flickering light of candle or lamp, they also imbued the words displayed on the cross with the divine presence<sup>29</sup>.

7/ Deposition from the Cross, *De laudibus Sanctae Crucis*, ca 1100 (text possibly ca 1150) / Biblioteca Statale (Lucca), MS 370, f. 102v

23 Valdez del Álamo, *A Palace of the Mind* (n. 14), p. 97, n. 322.

24 See, for instance, far-reaching conclusions presented in Mary J. Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images*, Cambridge 1998, pp. 69–72.

25 This cross has changed location in several churches in Zadar, but no written evidence prior to the late 16th century survives. See Igor Fisković, "Unknown Master from Zadar, Crucifixion with the Dying Christ, 13th c. [cat. no. 67]", in *Prvih pet stoljeća hrvatske umjetnosti = The First Five Centuries of Croatian Art*, Biserka Rauter Plančić ed., Zagreb 2006, pp. 274–276.

26 The distinguished plans of the imagery and text of the Silos Deposition have recently been addressed by Vincent Debais, *La croisée des signes. L'écriture et les images médiévales (800–1200)*, Paris 2017, pp. 153–154. The author does not touch on the questions of other employment of the *Rex obit* verse.

27 Due to the larger number of syllables in the second half of the verse, the body of Christ does not correspond to the main caesura in the text, which comes after the word *plorat*.

28 The "range of interpretative possibilities" was discussed by Brown, "The Verse Inscription" (n. 3), pp. 90 n19, 99, 101; see also Elizabeth Valdez del Álamo, "Hearing the Image at Santo Domingo de Silos", in *Resounding Images: Medieval Intersections of Art, Music and Sound*, Susan Boynton, Diane Reilly eds, Turnhout 2015, pp. 71–90, sp. pp. 79–80.

29 Erik Thunø, "Inscription and Divine Presence: Golden Letters in the Early Medieval Apse Mosaic", *Word & Image*, xxvii/3 (2011), pp. 279–291, sp. pp. 279, 281.



8/ Crucifix, Church of San Pellegrino agli Scalzi, Ancona, ca 1250

9/ Crucifix, Cathedral treasury, Minden, ca 1100

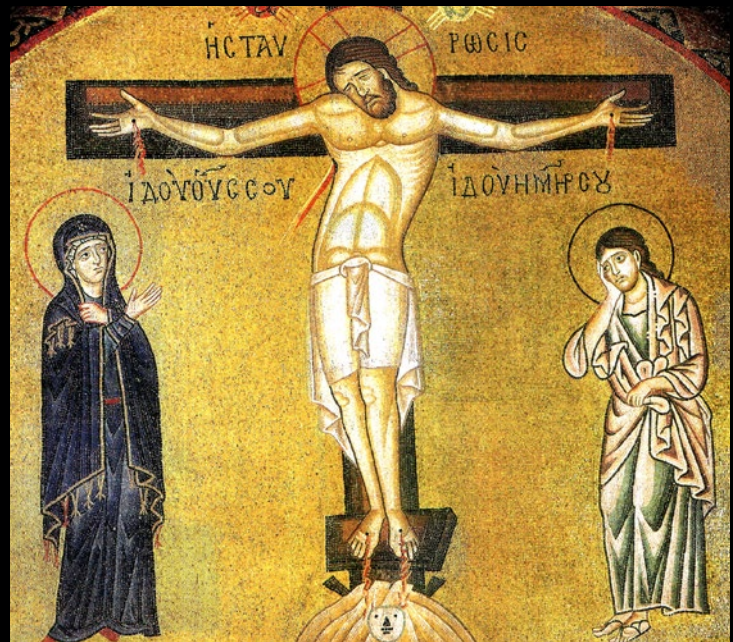
## Holy words on painted crosses in Zadar and beyond

Much is still there to be written on the textual and iconographical trajectories of the *Rex/Hic obit* line. In the remainder of this paper, however, I will pursue a different direction by focusing on monumental crosses in Zadar and their respective texts<sup>30</sup>. Narrowing down the subject to a group of crosses calls for an attentive examination of their relation, in the first place their relative chronology. This inquiry of local background is essential given that communities possessed preferred types of crosses, such as painted over sculpted. This suggests that a specific type was, to a certain extent, a matter of civic tradition<sup>31</sup>. The number of crosses with inscriptions is, however, limited and, although comparable examples to the ones in Zadar do survive, they are not specific to a certain city or region. Over the thirteenth century, crosses adorned with rimmed inscriptions were sporadically produced in Ancona, San Pellegrino agli Scalzi [Fig. 8]; Pisa, San Pietro in Vinculis and Venice, Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari. From earlier times (eleventh century), survive impressive bronze crosses from Minden, Saints Gorgonius and Peter (now in the cathedral treasury) [Fig. 9], and Vercelli, the cathedral of Sant'Eusebio<sup>32</sup>. The assemblage of three such crosses in Zadar, therefore, is a singularity within both the extant corpus of medieval monumental crosses (both painted and sculpted) and, more generally speaking, in terms of such prominent lettering on devotional objects.

Arguably, the earliest of the Zadar group is the imposing half-sculpted / half-painted crucifix (measuring 270 × 215 cm) from the collection of the Franciscan friary, possibly dating from the very end of twelfth, but more probably from the beginning of the thirteenth century [Fig. 10]<sup>33</sup>. The cross displays a strong connection to Byzantine imagery in stylistic features, iconography, and lettering. The latter includes a *titulus* composed of a juxtaposed Greek monogram of Christ, placed in roundels that frame the Latin caption *Rex iudeorum*. Also, the upper wording on the crossbar reads *i stavbrosis*, a somewhat incorrectly written Greek for “Crucifixion”. Although

- 30 They have been most fully treated by Grgo Gamulin, "La pittura su tavole nel tardo medioevo sulla costa orientale dell'Adriatico", in *Venezia e il Levante fino al secolo XV*, vol. 2: *Arte-Letteratura-Linguistica*, Agostino Pertusi ed., Florence 1974, pp. 181–209, sp. pp. 184–189; and *idem*, *The Painted Crucifixes in Croatia*, Zagreb 1983, pp. 13–18, 115–117. Apart from Gamulin's insights, these objects have attracted only minor scholarly interest, for the most part limited to auxiliary notes. Hans Belting remarked in passing that the Zaratine crosses were emulating the miracle-working *Crocifisso del Capitello* in St Mark in Venice, but without offering any further explanation. See Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*, London 1994, p. 197; and this line of thought was followed by Beat Brenk, "Il Ciborio esagonale di S. Marco in Venezia", in *L'arte di Bisanzio e l'Italia al tempo dei Paleologi 1261–1453*, Antonio Iacobini, Mauro Della Valle eds, Rome 1999, pp. 144–158, sp. pp. 147–148.
- 31 Katarina Ch. Schüppel, "Pictae et sculptae. Tafelkreuze und plastische Kruzifixe im lokalen liturgischen Kontext. Die Städte Lucca, Arezzo und Neapel", *Römisches Jahrbuch der Bibliotheca Hertziana*, xxxviii (2010), pp. 77–112.
- 32 Their inscriptions are: "Mortis destructor, vitae reparator et auctor" (Pisa, ca 1270); "In cruce monstravit quantum te gratis amavit / pro mundi vita suam crucifixit ita" (Venice, last quarter of the 13th century); "Quod mala sim passus [...] et creatura fatetur / ora manus, corpus tum latus atque pedes" (Ancona, mid to late 13th century); "Mulier ecce filius tuus e ad discipulum autem ecce mater tua" (Vercelli, late 11th century); and "Hoc reparat Christus deus in ligno crucifixus / Quod destruxit Adam deceptus in arbore quadam" (Minden, ca 1000). These inscriptions call for a separate study, but it is worth noting that the cross from Ancona has comparable lettering to the one on the Franciscan cross in Zadar in terms of its "speaking feature". For San Pellegrino cross, see Irene Sacco, "Due crocifissi medievali nell'Anconetano", in *Legni marchigiani. Schede materiali dal XIII al XIX secolo*, Antonio Iacobini, Grazia M. Fachechi eds, Ancona 2001, pp. 15–20. Verse inscriptions are also present on Rosano cross, paired with narrative scenes on its apron, discussed by Kessler, "Inscriptions on Painted Crosses" (n. 6). The little-known stone cross from Museo Nazionale d'Arte Medievale e Moderna in Arezzo features an inscription that does not differ much from the *titulus* "Jesus of Nazareth who was hung on the cross for us", but, considering the figure of St Michael in the uppermost part of the cross, is conceptually most similar to Zaratine crosses. See Leonardo Magionami, "Innovation and Resistance: Sacred Epigraphy in Medieval Arezzo (Twelfth–Thirteenth Centuries)", *Progressus*, 1/2 (2014), pp. 1–21, sp. pp. 6–7.
- 33 For this cross, see Hanna Egger, "Tafelfreuz, Dalmatinisch, unter toskanischem Einfluß, 2. Drittel 12. Oder Anfang 13. Jh.", in *800 Jahre Franz von Assisi: Franziskanische Kunst und Kultur des Mittelalters*, catalogue of the exhibition (Krems – Stein, Minoritenkirche 15 May – 17 October 1982), Johannes Gründler ed., Vienna 1982, p. 618; Igor Fisković, "Unknown Master, Crucifixion with the Living Christ, 12th/13th Century", in *Proih pet stoljeća* (n. 25), pp. 264–265. The cross predates the erection of the first Franciscan house in Zadar, and some scholars were tempted to argue that the first Dalmatian followers of St Francis "perceived an echo of the miraculous speaking crucifix of San Damiano in this effigy". See Donal Cooper, "Gothic Art and the Friars in Medieval Croatia (1213–1460)", in *Croatia: Aspects of Art, Architecture and Cultural Heritage*, with an introduction by John J. Norwich, London 2009, pp. 76–97, sp. p. 78.





10/ Crucifix, collection of the Franciscan friary, Zadar, dated between 1180–1250

11/ Crucifixion with a Greek inscription from John 19:27, narthex mosaic, Hosios Loukas, Katholikon, early 11<sup>th</sup> century

12/ Crucifix (destroyed), formerly in the Benedictine nunnery of St Mary, Zadar, ca 1250–1280

the letter “v” occurs as “v” and as “b – in the Greek and Latin alphabet, respectively – this should not be regarded as a misspelling but, possibly, as a phonetical rendering of the word<sup>34</sup>. The Greek caption is enclosed by the typically Byzantine punctuation marks; the four dots in a diamond formation signaling the beginning, and two vertical dots with a horizontal dash between them announcing the end of the excerpt.

The crossbar of the Franciscan cross is formed of three horizontal surfaces, of which the upper and lower ones appear slanted, as suggested by their painted treatment: yellow stripes mark the upper and black ones the lower face. In consequence, the Latin verse inscription of the Franciscan cross, “Hasten to me, you who believe in me”<sup>35</sup>, is aligned to the lower edge of the crossbar. Conceptually most similar to this Zadar cross (in the layout of the lettering) is the eleventh-century mosaic showing Crucifixion in the narthex of Hosios Loukas in Boeotia that in the same manner displays the Crucifixion caption, but as well a longer inscription running parallel to the crossbar: “Women, here is your son, and disciple, here is your mother” [Fig. 11]<sup>36</sup>. The words inscribed on the Franciscan cross are, in an equal manner, uttered by Christ himself; it is the divine “i” of the Christ that conveys the message of the rimmed divine speech<sup>37</sup>.

The third example from Zadar, the painted cross that once belonged to the Benedictine nunnery of Saint Mary can, in all probability, be dated to the middle or to the second half of the thirteenth century, but sadly did not survive the Second World War bombing that wiped out a great deal of the city’s medieval heritage<sup>38</sup>. Fortunately, a black and white photograph remains [Fig. 12].



both Eastern and Western mosaics, fresco paintings, *encolpia*, manuscripts, ivory plaques, and, more conspicuously, on a silver cross of large proportions. A great number of instances was brought together by Marco Petoletti, “Voci immobili: le iscrizioni de Ariberto”, in *Ariberto da Intimiano: fede, potere e cultura a Milano nel secolo XI*, Ettore Bianchi, Martina B. Weatherill eds, Cinisello Balsamo / Milan 2007, pp. 123–155, sp. p. 143.

34 Similar instance of the same Greek caption, but written as *i staufrosis* can be found on the Crucifixion scene of the Sacramentary of Henry II. See Walter Berschin, *Greek Letters and the Latin Middle Ages: From Jerome to Nicholas of Cusa*, revised and expanded edition, trans. by Jerold C. Frakes, Washington, D.C. 1988, p. 199. On the other hand, misspellings of different types can be found in a number of inscriptions from the close cultural zones. See Ivan Drpić, “Painter as Scribe: Artistic Identity and the Arts of Graphē in Late Byzantium”, *Word & Image*, XXIX/3 (2013), pp. 334–353, p. 336.

35 *In me credentes, ad me concurrite gentes.*

36 The fortuna of this formula considerably exceeds that of the *Rex obit* verse, because it has been commonly paired with the Crucifixion imagery of the eleventh and twelfth centuries in

37 For equal “divine voicing” of inscriptions, employed in a number of altar inscriptions, see Kristin B. Aavitsland, “Visual Splendour and Verbal Argument in Romanesque Golden Altars”, *Acta ad archaeologiam et artium historiam pertinentiam*, XXIV (2011), pp. 205–226, sp. pp. 214–215.

38 The exact dimensions of the Benedictine cross are not recorded (app. 140 × 190 cm). It is highly likely that the upper sides of the crucifix had been cut off, thus eliminating the figures of the Virgin and St John (and possibly St Michael at the top), which would match the size of this cross with that of the other two examples from Zadar. The stylistic affinities of the cross call for a separate study. Until then, see Emil Hilje, Radoslav Tomić, *Slikarstvo: umjetnička baština zadarske nadbiskupije*, Zadar 2006, pp. 98–99.

The Benedictine cross featured two lines of text, running across the lower and upper edges of the horizontal bar, respectively. Majuscule letters of the lower inscription are original, yet the heavily abbreviated upper text was added later, probably in the fourteenth century<sup>39</sup>.

Customarily preceded by the sign of the cross, the lower inscription bears a simple yet vigorous verse: "The sun sinks, the world quakes, the rock cracks, this one dies"<sup>40</sup>. The text in this case, therefore, does not reproduce the imagery displayed on the cross; rather, Christ is depicted as living, contrary to the inscription that proclaims His death<sup>41</sup>. Moreover, the metrical qualities of the line were additionally underlined by inserting the *puncti*, separating each miraculous appearance that announced the death of Christ. One such *punctus* compelled the reader to take a relevant pause when the end of a *sensus* was reached<sup>42</sup>. The inscription was drawn from the Gospel accounts of the Crucifixion: the trope of the eclipse of the sun (*sol latet*), recorded in Luke (23:44) and Mark (15:33), was followed by the earthquake (*orbis tremit*), after which the rock was rent (*saxum crepitat*). All these motifs are brought in the Gospel of Matthew (27:45–54) and were elaborated upon in the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus (chapter VIII), a widely disseminated work in the eastern Adriatic and Zadar, which could point to the origin of the inscription<sup>43</sup>.

The upper distich displayed on the Benedictine cross are the thirteenth and fourteenth verses of the poem *Chartula contemptus mundi*, better known simply as the *Chartula*, long considered to have been composed by Bernard of Clairvaux, but of uncertain authorship. The poem, which addresses the young novices, was a part of the *auctores octo* collection, a carefully selected corpus of works considered particularly suitable for purposes of moral and literal education<sup>44</sup>. In this light, the opinion of Matthew of Vendôme expressed in his *Ars Versificatoria* (ca 1175) is worth recalling. He hailed the *Chartula* for its plain style and claimed to have studied the work in his youth<sup>45</sup>. The couplet, "Whoever loves Christ loves not this world but spurns its love like a stench"<sup>46</sup>, is a comparable to the *Rex/Hic obit* line since it occurs independently from the presupposed original, which testifies to its great appeal, also evident from its

repeated appearance in texts<sup>47</sup>. One example is found in a copy of the short twelfth-century treatise on fallacies known as *Compendiosus tractatus de fallaciis* (BNF, MS lat. 7411, fol. 6r), which unexpectedly ends after only a few folios, leaving the final page free for scribal notes. Another hand, later than the text of *Compendiosus*, penned the *Quisquis amat* couplet, with a *punctus* separating each word from the following one as if the scribe was focusing on slow and gradual memorization of the distich that stands in no relation to the text on fallacies<sup>48</sup>. Furthermore, these two lines later found their way into William Langland's great fourteenth-century poem, the *Vision of Piers Plowman*, again testifying to the longevity of devotional formulae occasionally, as we have seen, employed on large painted crosses<sup>49</sup>.

This brings us back to the issue of micro-regional endorsement of the specific type of crosses, and to Franciscan cross as a prototype of the display of the inscriptions on other Zaratine crosses. Indeed, much of the recent scholarly work on medieval crosses had tried to single out the venerated prototypes that were subsequently copied, driven either by the patron's ambition to emulate earlier models or the artist's intention to reproduce a specific cross or a combination of both motivations. For instance, Fulvio Cervini has underscored the possible implications of emulating the monumental cross that once stood in Old Saint Peter's in Rome and the role of Ottonian crosses as models for thirteenth-century wooden crucifixes<sup>50</sup>, whereas the contemporaneous crosses of Roman provenance are considered to follow the venerable image of the Lateran Acheiropoieton<sup>51</sup>. Furthermore, Giunta Pisano's crucifix for the mother church of the Franciscans in Assisi has been advanced as a prototype for later crosses in churches of the Order<sup>52</sup>. Perhaps, a more directly pertinent study is Ann Driscoll's examination of Alberto Sotio's cross in Spoleto. Driscoll interpreted Sotio's cross as a model which was, in whole or only in its specific details, emulated in no less than five later Umbrian crosses<sup>53</sup>.

A comparable situation can be envisioned for thirteenth-century Zadar, with the Franciscan cross at the beginning of this local tradition [Fig. 10]. Worth noting is the bas-relief rendering

of the figure of Christ. With only a few solid points of reference, this characteristic could have originated in metalwork<sup>54</sup>, or in the Byzantine tradition of embossed icons<sup>55</sup>. Moreover, the central knot of the loincloth was decorated with gems, both painted and implanted (now lost). Though one cannot speculate on the precise types of precious stones that were embedded in the knee-length loincloth, one cannot fail to notice the abundance of decoration which indicates the lavishness of this venerable object. All this, including the divine voice of the flickering text, point to the veneration in which this earliest Franciscan cross from Zadar was held.

### Conclusion

Zadar crosses reflected the pervasive pious formulae and the trans-European entanglements of the shared culture of devotional texts. These lines, for their visual and textual characteristics that had the potential to rouse piety in its readers, have been used to adorn Crucifixion and Deposition scenes in manuscripts and prayer books. However, the lines have not been inscribed on more than a handful of monumental crosses. Though the tradition of using prominent lettering was not at all rooted in specific forms of devotional imagery, the isolated instance of this group of crosses is revealing on several counts. While the commissioners and artists have adopted different iconographies (the preference for the dying Christ over the living Christ) and different techniques of the fabrication of the crosses (painted over, sculpted in low relief, etc.), the objects were always endowed with equally prominent verse inscriptions. Zadar crosses enrich the picture of devotional resonances of sacred objects for they are – in a characteristically medieval manner – a chain of copies. The process of copying earlier crosses perpetuated the placement and rendering of the text, but the written message was always changed and modified to different devotional need<sup>56</sup>.

The persistence of the *Rex obit* question from Schapiro's time to our time shows that geographies of image captions do not point to the origin of the inscriptions with any degree of clarity.

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- 39 The different chronology of the verses has already been observed by Marušić, "Verses of Faith" (n. 5), p. 403.
- 40 "Sol latet, orbisque tremit, saxum crepitat, iste cedit". See Gamulin, *The Painted Crucifixes* (n. 30), p. 50. The translation is my own.
- 41 This cross cannot be dated based on the iconography of the Living Christ because, at least in Dalmatia, there are later examples from early 14th century. See Žana Matulić-Bilač, "Christus triumphans – slikano raspelo iz crkve Sv. Andrije na Čiovu", *Portal*, IV (2013), pp. 73–102.
- 42 The verse inscription on the Benedictine cross reflects changes in the use of *puncti* that occurred during the 13th century, when such signs were employed to underline the meaning, rather than to orchestrate the vocalization, see Volker Mertens, "Visualizing Performance? Music, Word, and Manuscript", in *Visual Culture and the German Middle Ages*, Kathryn Starkey, Horst Wenzel eds, Basingstoke 2005, pp. 135–158, sp. p. 138.
- 43 One of the earliest known vernacular renditions of the text originates from Dalmatia, from an unidentified Benedictine scriptorium. See André Vaillant, *L'Évangile de Nicodème. Texte slave et texte latin*, Geneva/Paris 1968, p. 9, who argued for late 10th century; while Francis J. Thomson, "Apocrypha Slavica II", *The Slavonic and East European Review*, LXIII/1 (1985), pp. 73–98, sp. p. 80, opted for later time, in the 11th or 12th century, in "Croatia or Dalmatia".
- 44 Ronald E. Pepin, *An English Translation of Auctores Octo, a Medieval Reader*, Lewiston/Lampeter 1999, pp. 55–57.
- 45 *Ibidem*, p. 57.
- 46 "Quisquis amat Christum mundum non diligit istum, sed quasi fetores spernens illius amores".
- 47 *Carmina medii aevi posterioris latina*, vol. 2: *Proverbia sententiaeque latinitatis medii aevi: lateinische Sprichwörter und Sentenzen des Mittelalters in alphabetischer Anordnung*, no. 4 (M–S), Hans Walter ed., Göttingen 1966, p. 405.
- 48 Yukio Iwakuma, *Instantiae: A Study of Twelfth Century Technique of Argumentation with an Edition of Ms. Paris BN Lat. 6674 F. 1–5*, Copenhagen 1981, p. 10.
- 49 John A. Alford, *Piers Plowman: A Guide to the Quotations*, Binghamton 1992, p. 88.
- 50 Fulvio Cervini, "Di alcuni crocifissi 'trionfali' del secolo XII nell'Italia settentrionale", *Arte medievale*, VII/1 (2008), pp. 9–31, sp. pp. 9, 22; see also Gaetano Curzi, "Tra Saraceni e Lanzichenecchi. Crocifissi monumentali di età carolingia nella basilica di S. Pietro", *Arte medievale*, II/2 (2002), pp. 15–28, sp. p. 21.
- 51 Giordana Benazzi, "Albertone e i suoi compagni. Croci dipinte del XII e XIII secolo tra Umbria e Marche", in *Croci dipinte nelle Marche: capolavori di arte e spiritualità dal XIII al XVII secolo*, Maria Giannatiempo López, Giovanna Venturi eds, Ancona 2014, pp. 53–67, sp. p. 57.
- 52 Cannon, "The Great Painted Crucifix" (n. 6), p. 577.
- 53 Ann Driscoll, "Death and Life: The Persistence of Sacred Imagery from the *Croce Dipinta* of Alberto Sotio", in *Byzantine Images and Their Afterlives. Essays in Honor of Annemarie Weyl Carr*, Lynn Jones ed., Farnham 2014, pp. 229–253, sp. p. 241.
- 54 Katarina Ch. Schüppel, "Fede e iconografia: le croci di Ariberto", in *Ariberto da Intimiano* (n. 36), pp. 289–307, sp. p. 304.
- 55 See, for instance, the 13th-century low reliefs of the Virgin from the Zaratine churches, Nikola Jakšić, Emil Hilje, *Umjetnička baština zadarske nadbiskupije: Kiparstvo 1, od IV. do XVI. stoljeća*, Zadar 2008, pp. 174–175.
- 56 For comparable situation when chain of copies of venerable crosses can be established, see, e.g., Claudia D'Alberto, "Il crocifisso parlante di Santa Brigida di Svezia nella basilica di San Paolo fuori le mura e i crocifissi replicati, copiati e riprodotti a Roma al tempo del papato avignonese", *Studi medievali e moderni*, XXIX/1–2 (2011), pp. 229–255.



Relating the long-lasting debate on the *Rex obit* verse to Zaratine crosses shed valuable light on the pan-European and micro-regional situations and helped us better understand the objects of our study, beyond geographically proximate and stylistically closer (and obvious) parallels. The answer to the question of how inscriptions spanned distant geographical boundaries and great cultural differences, perhaps, does not elude us anymore. However, what is indeed fascinating is that verses of devotional poems and image captions could have transformed the ubiquitous images of Crucifixion or Deposition into aids for meditation and prayer to be used by diverse devotional communities throughout medieval Europe.

## Malované kříže a trajektorie středověkých doprovodných nápisů

Příklady ze Zadaru třináctého  
století a dalších míst

Článek je věnován skupině malovaných křížů ze třináctého století z dalmatského města Zadar, které na příčném břevnu zobrazují stejně koncipované, pohled upoutávající nápisy. Ačkoli studovaná skupina křížů pochází z jednoho města, reflektuje široce rozšířené úryvky zbožných textů, které jsou součástí transevropského spletence sdílené kultury textů a předmětů. Autor shromažďuje příklady jednoduchých nápisů, které v uměleckých dílech napříč Evropou plní funkci „obrazových titulků“. Zvláštní pozornost věnuje monumentálním křížům, a to jak malovaným, vyřezávaným, tak odlévaným do bronzu. Vychází přitom z dlouhotrvajících debat o verši „*Rex obit*“, který se objevuje nejen na jednom ze zadarských křížů, ale i v rámci řady dalších vyobrazení Snímání z kříže či Ukřížování. Předložené důkazy tak vrhají nové světlo na středověké předměty s výrazně vyvedenými nápisy. Vizuální, textový, a především devoční potenciál těchto doprovodných nápisů byl příznačný zejména pro scény Ukřížování a Snímání z kříže, a to především v rukopisech a modlitebních knihách. Sporadicky se ale objevily i na několika monumentálních krucifixech. Avšak pouze zřídka je možné zjistit, jaké typy textů se před těmito velkými středověkými deskovými malbami zpívaly

či recitovaly, a právě v tomto kontextu jsou zadarské kříže zcela jedinečnými památkami, které mohou osvětlit studium devočního potenciálu středověkých krucifixů. Doprovodné nápisy na zadarských křížích by proto měly být vnímány jako prostředníci mezi obrazem a divákem usnadňující meditaci.

Podobně jako v uměleckohistorických příručkách tak i mezi dochovanými kříži ze středověkého Zadaru zaujímá výsadní postavení nejstarší františkánský kříž, a to díky celkovému archaickému stylu, způsobu zobrazení nápisů i díky kombinaci materiálů. Jako nejpravděpodobnější předchůdce studované skupiny se právě tento kříž stal stálým referenčním bodem pro objednavatele křížů pozdějších, které napodobovaly jeho nejvýraznější rysy. Přestože objednavatelé později volili jiné náměty (umírajícího Krista namísto živého) i jiné techniky (malované kříže spíše než vyřezávané), byla jejich umělecká díla vždy obdařena stejně nápadnými veršovanými nápisy. Tradice a přetrvávání stejných schémat v devocionálních obrazech však neznamenal sériovou replikaci křížů v oblasti jednoho města, ale vedly k sofistikovaným adaptacím, které sledovaly různé linie zbožnosti a které pojily invenci s touhou napodobit obdivovaný exemplář.