This essay recalls the cultural breadth and historical transformations of architectural inscription, from sententious epigraphy to signage. It then focuses on a case from the periphery of Europe, in Ireland, where classicising interventions were conditioned by the encounter with Gaelic civilization. In the late eighteenth century, Richard Robinson, Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland, remodelled the cathedral city of Armagh through the erection of a sequence of axially-related monuments and buildings which were also linked epigraphically. The essay explores how the inscriptions worked together to articulate the ambitions of Robinson’s project and the meanings generated by the overlay of a classicising urbanistic intervention on an ancient Irish site with its own embedded topographical and literary relationships. Robinson’s architectural inscriptions are not only in play with one another, but with earlier levels and kinds of monumental writing, pertaining to the Insular church and the pre-Christian mythological landscape. The architectural epigraphy is thus viewed as one manifestation amongst multiple strata of monumental and place-specific texts used to construct the pre-eminence of an ecclesiastical city.

Preamble: from epigraphy to signage

Text on buildings reflects the ways that the built (urban) environment is or should be inhabited; it can be aspirational, normative, or descriptive – read phenomenologically in the context of the lived city or promoting its abstraction into information. The deployment of text on architecture occurs in many cultures and at many levels, from monumental inscriptions to graffiti. The global character of the topic is evident in such varied examples as the long tradition of Qur’ānic inscriptions, the epigraphy of South Indian temples or the complex Sanskrit poetry inscribed at the Khmer temples of Angkor.

Amongst the most obvious aspects of inscription is the language chosen; the preponderance of Latin in European architectural epigraphy reflects its status as a ‘timeless’, supranational language, intelligible to ruling elites. Humanist revival of Roman square capitals established enduring epigraphic and typographic norms with their seemingly perennial ability to connote cultural authority, even (or particularly) to an audience unable to read the words inscribed. Universality can more rarely be addressed through multilingualism, as at the Basilica della Santa Casa in Loreto, where the Translato miraculosa, a text concerning the angelic transportation of the house of Mary, was inscribed on plaques affixed to the nave pilasters in eleven languages: Greek, Arabic, Italian, Spanish, French, German, “Slavic” (Serbo-Croat), Welsh, Irish, Scots and English. Alternatively, the potential for linguistic incomprehensibility or obsolescence could be evaded altogether by using pictograms or “hieroglyphs”, as Alberti recommended, in a discussion that presaged the links between epigrams, mottoes, gnomic sayings and devices which would flourish with Erasmus’ Adagia (Paris 1500, rev. 1508) and Alciati’s Emblemata (Augsburg 1531). Architectural epigraphy in the sense of a text, often in a classical language exhibiting certain rhetorical features (e.g., brevity, wit, enigma), inscribed on a significant or monumental edifice in a display of intellectual, genealogical or social prestige is only one manifestation of text on building. Beyond this conception of epigraphy as architectural ornament, we can posit a continuum of signs which make buildings or urban spaces ‘speak’, ranging in pre-modern cities from classicising epigraphy to painted signboards and graffiti. Signage may incorporate rebus and heraldic devices, denoting or implying aristocratic endorsement, and was an early legal requirement for certain trades, such as brewers and innkeepers (required to erect advertising signs from 1389 in England and 1567 in France). A “citizen comedy” such as Ben Jonson’s Alchemist (first performed 1610) shows contemporary London as a field of emblems and rebus manipulated by the charlatan protagonists who play on disjunctions between word, image, referent and reality. Here emblematics becomes co-extensive with civic life, providing the means to perform identity and articulate the urban context. A century later, Addison discussed the devices invented to identify houses and businesses, designating the name, trade or even the humoral disposition of the proprietor. The signage he de-
Fig. 1 Armagh, Northern Ireland. Robinson Library, formerly Armagh Public Library (photo I. Maginess © Governors and Guardians of Armagh Robinson Library).

Fig. 2 W. Hogarth, Beer Street, 1751 © New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Sarah Lazarus, 1891 (public domain).

1 I wish to thank Sean Barden, Curator of Armagh County Museum, Carol Conlin, Assistant Keeper of the Armagh Robinson Library and Anne Marie D’Arcy for their scholarly generosity and unstinting help and support with this article.

2 The Latin original was composed by Pietro di Giorgio Tolomeo (Il Teramano) ca. 1470. Vincenzo Casali, governor of the basilica 1578-82 had the first seven translations made for the benefit of pilgrims, while the tablets in the four languages of Britain and Ireland were created by the emigrated English Jesuit Robert Corbet in 1634-35, perhaps in recognition of the political significance of pilgrimage to Loreto for Catholic princes (including the exiled Gaelic lords in 1688); see F. Grimaldi, La Historia della Chiesa della Santa Casa di Loreto, London 1985, pp. 498-510. Loreto is significantly the only case where the Celtic languages are shown together and co-equal with English. In Britain in 2020 an Irish-language only epitaph was prohibited by an English ecclesiastical court on the grounds that the language in itself constituted a political slogan.

3 L. B. Alberti, De re aedificatoria, VIII.2-4. Etruscan is an example of a language fallen into incomprehensibility. Collections of gnomic verse or inscriptions appear as early as the sixth century BCE poet, with a corpus of gnomic verse attributed to the Theognis. Demetres of Phaleron was said by Stobaeus to have collected Hellenistic inscriptions. For transcriptions of fourteen Greek gnomological collections, see https://ancientwisdoms.ac.uk/library/gnomologia/index.html (accessed 16 September 2022). Epigraphic sylloges and Quattrocento lamo Donato that he was so pestered to produce mottoes for. Ancient wisdoms.ac.uk/library/gnomologia/intro-greek-gnomologia/index.html (accessed 16 September 2022).

4 See J. Larwood, J. Camden Hotten, English Inn Signs, Exeter 1985; A Heal, The Signboards of Old London Shops: a Review of the Shop Signs Employed by the London Tradesmen during the XVIIIth and XIXth centuries, London 1988.

5 In B. Jonson, Alchemist, London 1612, II.iv the charlatans devise an absurd rebus as a signboard for a tobacco vendor, claimed to be a “hieroglyphic” which will exert a “virtual influence” on passers-by. Jonson simultaneously composed erudite emblematic masques for the Stuart court.

6 J. Addison, “Spectator”, XXVIII, 2 April 1711, reprinted London 1883, I, pp. 107-110. Addison notes that young tradesmen setting up shop joined their sign with that of their former master, like the quartering of heraldic bearings on marriage.

7 J. Addison described his essay as “a lively Picture of the Art of Modern Criticism”;

8 “Creatures of jarring and incongruous Natures” still follows the model of Renaissance imprese as evolved from the Humanist collections of apolothegmata assembled by Alciati or Erasmus. Addison described his essay as “a lively Picture of the Art of Modern Criticism”;

9 We might juxtapose his writings with Hogarth’s prints as the richest illustration of the convergence of classical epigraphy or Humanist emblematics with the semiotic field of the early modern city, where the proliferation of epigraphic-emblematic signs (bills, inscriptions, devices, signboards, graffiti) is interwoven with narrative structures adapted from history painting (fig. 2). The emblematic continuum furnishes semantic context and commentary for the action, providing a means by which the urban background attains agency; devices also carry the political narrative, as in The Times 1 and 2 (London 1762). This figural mode of reading the city would be replaced from the mid-eighteenth century by the development of street numbering and the gradual transition from pictorial or emblematic to written signage; what it meant to read the city thus changed profoundly.

10 During the eighteenth century, the introduction of street numbering in Vienna, Madrid, London and Paris amongst other cities replaced the pictorial designation of locale with a system of spatial legibility geared to administrative or military ends. The purpose of street numbers was not to facilitate city dwellers but concerned the billeting of soldiers, the collection of taxes and the gathering of information for commercial purposes, particularly linked with the production of city directories, originating in London in 1667, which catalogued trades and their locations.

scribes, with its grotesche-like conjunctions of ‘Creatures of jarring and incongruous Natures’
The compilers of city directories advertised the “economising” of time by the documentation of the “city-text” into lists of information which could promote and expedite commerce. The “spatial regime of inscriptions” produced by governmental requirements and commercial initiatives would ultimately result in the ‘abstract’ or ‘rationalized’ urban space of the modern city.

The city as text, as conceived by city trade directories and subsequently city managers or engineers, concerns the abstraction of urban geography into an index which can be read off with maximum speed and efficiency.

The utilitarianism of the compilers of city directories who declared that their compendia of urban facts allowed “no scope for the play of the imagination” contrasts with the figurative play of earlier signboards. By the nineteenth century, despite the explosive growth of lettering types for signage, the figural rendition of the city lay chiefly in literature; Dickens’ fantastical descriptions of London, with their bizarre conjunctions and metamorphoses of objects, might be seen as the descendent of the emblematic play in Hogarth. In Joyce’s Ulysses (Paris 1922), the proliferation of commercial signs and the multiple strata which constitute civic identity in the modern city, from municipal bureaucracy to primordial myth, interweaves with the citizens’ consciousness, taking the city-text to a further degree of richness. The poetic counterweight to the factual, rationalized city-text is by now however a creation of an author’s individual imagination unlike the ‘public’ experience of Hogarth’s emblematic signboards which rely on a collective figural imagination, albeit encompassing various levels of erudition or wit.

Inscribed buildings are not just as discrete objects but nodal points in the evolving interaction between language and urban fabric. The theme may be most richly approached if regarded as a spectrum, with varying degrees of permanence, authority and general or restricted legibility. A given inscription, whether monumental or subversive, poetic or technical, enduring or ephemeral, has a site-specific meaning but derives its further resonance in relation to the diversity of codes within the city and the multiple levels of institutional ordering which determine the possibilities and modalities of praxis. We can now turn to more concrete historical details to substantiate these arguments.

Epigraphy and urbanism at the margins of Europe

Architectural epigraphy in early modern Europe is often deployed on single buildings – a church or palace façade, for example, except in ephemeral decorations which transformed civic centres into celebratory theatres where individual edifices played an episodic role, articulated by their inscriptions. Instances where inscriptions on permanent buildings denote and articulate a realised, transformative urban project are rarer. One such case however survives on the periphery of Europe, in the ancient Irish cathedral city of Armagh, which was renovated following centuries of episcopal neglect and destruction in the 16th–17th century English Ireland in which Richard Robinson, Archbishop of Armagh 1765–94, instigated the removal of signboards and emblems as nuisances. Similar measures to remove signboards were taken in Paris in 1760.

The 1667 Little London Directory listed merchants and goldsmiths, in a period when goldsmiths started to act as bankers. The directory appears after the 1666 Great Fire of London which destroyed the medieval fabric of the city within the old Roman wall.

See E. Redwood, Indexing the Great Ledger of the Community, Urban House Numbering, City Directories and the Production of Spatial Legibility, “Journal of Historical Geography”, XXXIV, 2008, pp. 286-310. Hatton’s New View of London, 1708, noted the novelty of houses with numbering, providing a terminus post quem.

The Indexing the Great Ledger of the Community, Urban House Numbering, City Directories and the Production of Spatial Legibility, “Journal of Historical Geography”, XXXIV, 2008, pp. 286-310. Hatton’s New View of London, 1708, noted the novelty of houses with numbering, providing a terminus post quem.

Archaeology at Navan Fort has revealed a circular structure created ca. 95 BCE, 40 m in diameter by the attentive emblematic and sententious readings of Georg Lichtenberg in the “Göttingen Eichenskalendar”, 1784–86, translated in Lichtenberg’s Commentaries on Hogarth’s Engagements, trans. I. Herdan, G. Herdan, London 1966. The spurious and sententious readings of Georg Lichtenberg in the “Göttingen Eichenskalendar”, 1784–86, translated in Lichtenberg’s Commentaries on Hogarth’s Engagements, trans. I. Herdan, G. Herdan, London 1966.
Classical Epigraphy in an Irish Topography
Clare Lapraik Guest

On Ptolemy’s map, see R. Darby, W. Flynn, Ptolemy’s map of Ireland: a modern decoding, “Irish Geography”, XLI, 2008, 1, pp. 49-69; J. Stuart, Historical Memoirs of Armagh, Ne\n\n(© Armagh County Museum).

Fig. 3. Black, City of Armagh, 1810

The earliest recension of the dindsenchas is the twelfth cen\n\ntury Book of Leinsterr which incorporates pre-Christian mate\n\rrial; see Mühler, The Early Place-names . . . cit., E. Hogan, On\n\nomatopoeic goydealum loceanam et tribuum Hiberusae et Scoti\n\næ: an index, with identifications, to the Gaelic names of plac-\n\eres and tribes, Dublin 1993 (first ed. Dublin 1910); G. Gwynn, Poems from the Dindshenchas: text, translation, and vocabu-\n\lary, Dublin 1900; The Metrical Dindshenchas, edited by E. Gwynn, Dublin 1991 (first ed. Dublin 1903-1935); C. Bow-\n\nen, A historical inventory of the dindshenchas, “Studia Celtica”, XXI, 1975-1976, pp. 113-132.

The Bachall Isu, supposedly given to Patrick at Christ’s di-\n\nrection by a hermit on an island in the Tyrrhenian Sea, was en-\n\nclosed in a gold and jewelled cover or shrine and destroyed \n\nby the natural and monumental landscape through the \n\nlore of places . . . . The metrical dindsenchas concerning Emain Macha and Ard Macha relate legends of the eponymous Macha – the name of four female characters in Irish mythology – and attempt to gloss the word emain, relating it either to the words for a brooch or for twins . . . . They discuss Macha as the wife of the colonist Nemed who cleared the plain of Macha, or as the daugh-\n\nter of the High King Áed who fought and defeat-\n\ned her father’s cousins, Díthorba and Cimbáeth, ter of the High King Áed who fought and defeat-\n\ned her father’s cousins, Díthorba and Cimbáeth, and part of the \n\ncomarba and part of the \n\nir of Jesus), (successor of Patrick), along with St. Pat-\n\n(© Armagh County Museum).

Fig. 3. Black, City of Armagh, 1810

The Bachall Isu, supposedly given to Patrick at Christ’s di-\n\rection by a hermit on an island in the Tyrrhenian Sea, was en-\n\nclosed in a gold and jewelled cover or shrine and destroyed \n\nby the natural and monumental landscape through the \n\nlore of places . . . . The metrical dindsenchas concerning Emain Macha and Ard Macha relate legends of the eponymous Macha – the name of four female characters in Irish mythology – and attempt to gloss the word emain, relating it either to the words for a brooch or for twins . . . . They discuss Macha as the wife of the colonist Nemed who cleared the plain of Macha, or as the daugh-\n\nter of the High King Áed who fought and defeat-\n\ned her father’s cousins, Díthorba and Cimbáeth, ter of the High King Áed who fought and defeat-\n\ned her father’s cousins, Díthorba and Cimbáeth, and part of the \n\ncomarba and part of the \n\nir of Jesus), (successor of Patrick), along with St. Pat-
rick’s bell (Cloc ind Édachta, the Bell of the Testament), and the Book of Armagh (Caroín Pátraic, Patrick’s Testament)23. The verses move from a landscape of Macha, her plain and hill, ‘fort’ and grave, to a contrast between the site ‘founded’ by an Amazonian figure and a Christian saint who differentiates the topography, claiming the height for his church and laying waste to the pagan plain, recalling the sense of pagus as an outlying rural area or desert place (this landscape of hill and plain also exaggerates the gently rolling hillocks or drumlins of Armagh, as depicted in Black’s painting, fig. 3). These literary formulations and other statements on the ‘destruction’ of Emain Macha with the coming of Christianity form part of the foundational Christian mythology of Armagh – in which Emain Macha becomes the pagan ‘twin’ against which Patrician Armagh develops24. This contrastive topography appears also in the accounts of Patrick’s foundation of a church in Ard Saileach (termed the Ridge of Willows, Dorsum magh: he requests a site on the summit of Ard Macha as Grian, “the sun of womankind”)25. In Armagh we can perceive architectural epigraphy as a particularised manifestation of the larger articulation of the environment as a topography disclosed, transformed and manipulated through language.

Armagh’s ecclesiastical supremacy was claimed in the Liber angeli, dated between 640-707. Alongside the episcopal see a school arose in proximity to the abbey of Saints Peter and Paul which became an important centre for study (as attested by Bede and Aldfrith) and for manuscript production, most famously the Book of Armagh; at the Synod of Clane (1162) it was proclaimed that only alumni of Armagh should be lectors in divinity in Irish schools26. Armagh and its school suffered from Danish and later Anglo-Norman plundering and declined from the twelfth century due to Norman subjugation of Ulster and the arrival of the Cistercians and continental mendicant orders27. Armagh’s medieval floruit in short coincides with great age of Insular art, the European spread of Irish monastic learning (notably the preservation of Greek) which would culminate in the Carolingian period with Erigena and Sedulius Scotothus and the copious production of Hiberno-Latin literature28. Despite the

...
At the Reformation, St. Patrick’s cathedral became the Anglican (Church of Ireland) Cathedral. In the eighteenth century, Armagh was the most lucrative see in the Anglican church, with a revenue exceeding that of Canterbury.

The public library was renamed Armagh Robinson library in 2017. The precedent for the library was Marsh’s library, the first public library in Ireland created by Robinson’s predecessor Archbishop Narcissus Marsh in Dublin in 1707.

St. Mark’s stood within the parish of St. Patrick’s (the cathedral served also as a parish church) and was designed to ease pressure on it. The university project withered after Robinson’s death Muhr, The Early Place-names … cit., pp. 39-42, suggests that the Mall was the site for the tribal assembly (seanch) discussed in early Christian sources, which contain legends concerning relating Patrick to chariots, notably his punishment of Lupait (see n. 23). On Rocque’s 1760 map of Armagh, the common is marked “Horse Course” and its start and winning posts marked.

The observatory’s work was delayed following Robinson’s death by the reluctance of his successor to finance and equip it; its full functioning commenced during the primacy of John Beresford (1822-62), culminating in Dreyer’s renowned New General Catalogue of Nebulae and Clusters of Stars, London 1888.

A. Young, A Tour in Ireland, London 1897 (first ed. 1780), p. 49. Armagh also was of ‘marble’ as its characteristic red stained limestone and conglomerate of limestone fragments in pinkish sandstone were called “marbles” from their ability to polish highly. Robinson compelled his tenants to rebuild their houses in stone and slate once their leases lapsed. The pre-Robinson city is shown in John Rocque’s 1760 Map of Armagh, it was a thriving centre for the Irish linen market with a burgeoning population in the later eighteenth century.
wanning of the Irish church from the late twelfth century, Armagh however retained its metropolitan status and remains the Catholic and Anglican primatial see of all Ireland.

Robinson transferred the primatial residence from Drogheda (close to Dublin) to Armagh, building a bishop’s palace (1770), a public library (1771) behind St. Patrick’s cathedral and an astronomical observatory (1789) (fig. 1). He also assisted in financing public buildings: the infirmary (1767, completed 1774), and the 1774 relocation and rebuilding of the 1608 Royal School. He left funds for the creation of a university in Armagh and for St. Marks (1811), a chapel of ease on the east side of the Mall, closed by Robinson and released by his successor Primate Newcombe to the Grand Jury (town council) as a public amenity. The Mall was also transformed by the erection of the gaol (1780) at its south end, during Robinson’s period, and the facing Court House at the north end, in 1809.

The library, school, palace and gaol were designed by Thomas Cooley (1742-1784), the observatory, St. Mark’s and Court House by Francis Johnston (1760-1829), two of most able contemporary architects in Ireland. The observatory was the most ambitious of these mostly educational projects, appropriate to Robinson’s aim to (re)establish Armagh as a university city; inspired by Herschel’s discovery of the planet Uranus, it was equipped with the pioneering Troughton equatorial telescope. The public library and observatory were established by Acts of Parliament to ensure their independence in perpetuity and commemorated with medals, described below. Like Augustus, who found Rome a city of brick and left it a city of marble, Robinson was untruly claimed to have found Armagh a “nest of mud cabins and endeavoured to leave it a city of stone and slate”.

While the primate was the principal landowner in Armagh, Robinson did not group his projects together in a new development, in the manner of an eighteenth-century New Town, but sited them across the city so that they related to each other and to the cathedral; the buildings “were ingeniously woven into a single landscape while enjoying separate intimate landscapes of their own, the single greatest achievement being the archbishop’s own demesne”. They are thus most richly viewed in terms of their inter-relationships in the topography of an ancient site, although this does not imply that Robinson was concerned with the forma urbis of medieval Armagh.

The library stands between the cathedral and the infirmary on Vicar’s Hill, while the observatory and Royal School occupy facing sites on College Hill. The central node of the project appears to have been the Bishop’s palace; Richard Oram produced a schema that revealed Robinson’s urban projects as aligned in a kind of trident spreading out from his palace, with the observatory axis as the central line and the cathedral (extending to the library, marked with a lighter line) on the left axis and St. Mark’s on right; the St. Mark’s...
axis passes through the goal and beside the barracks, crucial elements of British order in Ireland45 (fig. 5). Behind this trident Oram’s schema shows a single axis extending beneath the palace which terminated in the Rokeby obelisk, erected on Knox’s Hill at the highest point in the palace demesne46. The cathedral (left) axis passes through the ruins of the thirteenth century Franciscan Friary in the demesne; the axis from the Rokeby obelisk to palace and from palace to cathedral are equidistant, each measuring 0.9 km47.

Oram’s proposal of axial alignments is reflected in a print by John Martyn (1819) which shows the obelisk on the horizon at the axial convergence of the school and palace, from a viewpoint at the base of the observatory hill48. Martyn’s viewpoint was widened in Philip Bainbridge’s 1834 drawing of Armagh viewed from higher up the same hill, where the central perspective runs through the Royal school to the obelisk, with St. Mark’s and the cathedral placed symmetrically left and right (fig. 6). Bainbridge suggests an axis from the observatory through the school to the obelisk – a monument type long associated with perpetual fame, axial planning and astronomical observation, as in the Solarium Augusti in the Campus Martius.

Robinson thus encompassed the renovated city within the landscaping of his palace, in a kind of planning novel in Ireland or Britain, but whose antecedents are hinted by Oram’s description of its “baroque statement in marked contrast to the restrained classicism of Robinson’s buildings”49. Robinson’s ‘baroque’ planning is familiar to students of Renaissance and Baroque urbanism where palaces were planned in relation to urban topographies, with landscaping and axial planning providing a medium which linked a palace or villa to a townscape49. Thus we might consider two levels of interest in Robinson’s urbanistic projects, the first being the employment of ‘baroque’ planning in which buildings and monuments act as nodes, creating axes or vistas within an existing cityscape and the cityscape is conceived as a perspective radiating from a palace. The most celebrated instances occur in 16th-18th century Rome, the archetypal sacred city on hills, with its ‘trident’ street plan, its sacred buildings dispersed on multiple hills connected via axial roads marked by obelisks and its opulent prelates’ villas within suburban parks, planned in alignment with the surrounding urban topography45. Such planning is distinct from the projection of New Towns in eighteenth century Britain and Ireland, laid out in squares and crescents away from existing civic centres46.

The second level of interest lies in the overlay of a planning derived ultimately from Italian Renaissance-Baroque urbanism on an early Irish topography. If Robinson’s structures were dispersed over the city’s hills, Armagh’s landscape is distinct from the verticality of Italian hill-town topography, whose dramatic impact lies in the tension between luminous summit and grotto. Armagh instead shows the concentric topography characteristic of early Irish royal and ecclesiastical sites, where a central hill or mound is encir-
eled by an enclosure, sometimes ringed by surrounding hills; this topography is fossilized in its street plan7 (figs. 3, 5). This superimposition of derivative baroque urbanism on an ancient concentric topography is most suggestive, but for the purposes of this publication Robinson’s interest lies in the key role played by inscriptions which form a kind of summum of his urban ambitions8.

We have seen the topographical significance of the Rokeby obelisk, erected in 1783 at the highest point in the palace demesne which displays on the pedestal the arms of Henry Percy, Duke of Northumberland and Lord Lieutenant of Ireland 1763-65 (instrumental in Robinson’s translation to the lucrative see of Armagh), and the British royal arms; the shaft displays Robinson’s arms as Baron Rokeby, his primatial arms and his motto NON NOBIS SOLUM SED TOTI MUNDO NATI (Born for the whole world, not for ourselves alone). The motto combines personal or familial glory with proclaimed public service; we might see the obelisk as the convergence point of Robinson’s urbanistic and scientific projects, as Bainbridge’s drawing suggests – like a Sistine obelisk or solarium Augusti in his ‘Augustan’ urban renovation9.

The library and observatory likewise bear inscriptions. The observatory’s south façade has a plaque quoting Psalm 19 in English translation, “The heavens declare the glory of God”10 and the library’s entrance façade originally carried the Greek inscription TO THE ΨΥΧΗΣ ΙΑΤΡΕΙΟΝ (to fè̂s psychei iatrieon, the healing place of the soul), altered in the 1848 remodelling and extension of the library attributed to Robert Monsarrat to ΨΥΧΗϹΙΑΤΡΕΙΟΝ11 (fig. 7). The library and observatory were commemorated in medals struck in bronze and silver in or after 1777 and 1791 (although dated 1771 and 1789) respectively; the library medal commemorates the opening of the library but names Robinson as Baron Rokeby of Armagh in the Irish peerage, a title he received in 1777. Commemoration of the building was thus tied to Robinson’s ennoblement, celebrated also in the obelisk12 (figs. 8-9). Robinson was a keen numismatic collector, his valuable collections of ancient, medieval and early modern coins, of engraved gems and gem impressions by James Tassie are conserved in the library13. The architectural inscriptions can be viewed as instances of Robinson’s wider interest in engraved objects, from miniature gemstones to monumental epigraphy.

Planning organised around axially related monuments, exemplified by the Rome of Sixtus V, relies on markers which give symbolic significance to axes which would otherwise be perspectives or circulation routes. These markers can be monuments whose form carries symbolic associations like obelisks or fountains, but inscription plays a vital role in articulating the meaning of the intervention, as well as proclaiming the builder’s fame. What role then did the inscriptions of Robinson’s obelisk, observatory and library play beyond commemorating him through his works? The obelisk as noted acts as an axial and thematic marker, illustrating the prospects from palace to cathedral (and library) and to the observatory. If we read the observatory’s motto, “The heavens declare the glory of God” in conjunction with the obelisk, we see the latter as pointing a way to the stars through its form and its illumination of an urban axis from observatory to bishop’s palace, or from palace to cathedral14. Beyond its astronomical applicability, the inscription suggests

6 On Armagh’s concentric topography, see APICHISON, Armagh… cit., pp. 211-288. The concentric or D-shaped topography where the landscape is drawn into an ‘encircling’ relation with a central eminence recurs in the ancient royal sites, in early Christian settlements at Clougher, Kells and Clonmacnoise or the stronghold of a ruling dynasty, as at the Hill of the O’Neill at Downpatrick.
7 Bishop Richard Mant discussed Robinson’s library and observatory through their inscriptions in R. MANT, History of the Church of Ireland, London 1840, pp. 635-634.
8 The observatory’s seven astronomical meridian markers, sited in the palace demesne and surrounding townlands included an obelisk or obelisk-bearing structures although these post-date Robinson’s death; see J. BUTLER, The Meridian Marks of Armagh Observatory, “Astronomy and Geophysics”, LVII, 2016, 2, pp. 2.27-2.31. MALCOMSON, Primates Robinson… cit., discusses Robinson’s securing of Irish estates for his family.
9 As a Protestant (Anglican) prelate, Robinson quotes scripture in the vernacular, using classical languages for familial or personal mottoes and for civic inscriptions.
10 The 1848 library remodelling undertaken by Robert Monsarrat involved the enlargement of the former entrance from three to five bays and the moving of the entrance plus inscription to the side façade, facing the cathedral.
11 The 1791 striking of the observatory medal may reflect the 1791 Act of Parliament which established the observatory; see n. 69 on these Acts.
12 The gems are conserved in contemporary daktyliothecae including 3100 Tassie gemstone impressions. Tassie devised his technique for gemstone impressions in collaboration with the Dublin physician Henry Quinn, whose bibliophile son Henry George Quinn (d. 1805) left a valuable collection of rare Renaissance printings to Trinity College Library Dublin.
13 In the urbanism of Sixtus V, the paths linking the Roman basilican churches whose axes culminated with recycled ancient obelisks were celebrated as a way (via) leading to the stars, with allusion to Mary’s stellar iconography.
The Oldest Library: 

The Oldest Library ...cit., pp. 536-539.

Important Armagh manuscripts include British Library Harley Ms. 1023 and 1082 (dated 1138). The other early manuscript in Irish minuscule is the early eighth century Antiphonary of Bangor. Reeves was obliged to sell the Book of Armagh to Primate Beresford, the first Irish archbishop of Armagh since 702, who donated it to Trinity College Dublin. Reeves published widely on early Irish calligraphy, topography, antiquities and ecclesiastical history, saving Navan Fort from agricultural destruction; see Dictionary of Irish Biography, https://www.dib.ie/biography/reeves-william-a7612 (accessed 16 September 2022). See n. 23 on the Book of Armagh, like the Baechall Isu, as part of the insignia denoting jurisdiction of Armagh, its custodianship was a hereditary office until the eighteenth century.

Diodorus based his account on the fourth century BCE Egyptian of Hecataeus of Abdera. Since no trace of a library in the Ramesseum has been discovered, it was proposed by L. Canfora, La biblioteca scomparsa, Palermo 1986, pp. 86-89, 154-167, 172-175, that the bibliotheca was not a room but a recess or structure containing scrolls and that psyche iatreion above the bibliotheca, where psyche translates the Egyptian ka (the vital spirit of a god or ruler, conceived as localised in certain places within mausolea), referred not to the book repository but designated the successive chamber (the final room before the pharaoh’s tomb) as the place where Rameses’ ka was operative. In Shelley’s Ozymandias, the boastful inscription and a mutilated colossal appear as ruins of despotism. For Platonic medical-philosophical analogies, see inter al. Gorgias 462e where the contrast between philosophy and rhetoric is likened to the contrast between medicine and cookery or Laws 720a-e, on legislation discussed through analogy to medicine.

C. Lutz, The Oldest Library Motto: ΨΥΧΗΣ ΙΑΤΡΕΙΩΝ, "The Library Quarterly", XLVIII, 1978, 1, pp. 56-59. Poggio Bracciolini’s pre-1455 Latin translation of Diodorus Siculus (printed Bologna 1472) mistranslated iatreion as medicine rather than museum place, a misreading perpetuated in John Skelton’s English manuscript translation. The Greek text of Diodorus recontextualised from 1539. Other ancient allusions to the "medicine of the soul" include Cicero, Tusculanae disputationes, III 1.1, Chrysostom, Homilies on Colossians, 9.

Lutz, The Oldest Library...cit., p. 37. The Abbey and scriptorium developed from an Irish foundation founded in the seventh century by Gall, who accompanied Columbanus, founder of the abbeys of Annegray, Luxeuil, Fontaines and Bobbio, in his exodus from the Irish monastic school of Bangor. The library hall dates to 1767; this library and its adjacent infirmary were planned together in a decree of 1757.

A typological dimension in the urbanism – centred on the archbishop’s palace from whose park the renovated city ‘extended’. If Psalm 19 inscribed on the observatory had obvious pertinence for ecclesiastically sponsored astronomy, the library inscription PSYCHES IATREION has some curious features. In the library medal, which shows Cooley’s design prior to extension, the inscription is prominent, with the word psychei stemped decisively above the building (fig. 8). James Stuart describes the inscription above the door, presumably in a tablet beneath the central window with the date 1771 carved in Greek characters ψωνος. When the library was extended under Primate John Beresford, the shortened inscription ΨΥΧΗΙΑΤΡΕΙΩΝ was carved not in adaptations of Roman square capitals but in elegantly designed uncials, in an epigraphic translation of biblical majuscule (fig. 10). The reason for the changed lettering style remains unclear; uncials are obviously associated with insular manuscript production which had an important centre in Armagh. Reeves, whose description of the characters as “archaic letter” (a more fitting description for Irish than Greek uncials) bought for the library in 1853 the most important Armagh manuscripts and one of the earliest surviving documents in Irish minuscule or pointed hand, the Book of Armagh.

There are two antique sources for the psychei iatreion motto: Diodorus Siculus’ Bibliotheca Historia (1.49) and Epictetus’ Discourses (III.23.30). Diodorus recounts that the words psychei iatreion were inscribed above the bibliothekē in the Ramesseum of Thebes, the monumental complex of Pharoah Ozymandias (Rameses II), described as a great builder whose epitaph challenged posterity to outdo his works. Epictetus in his Discourses spoke of his philosophical school as an iatreion, in a passage contrasting oratory as a public entertainment with philosophy as medicine, whose salutary severity is essential to effect a cure. Epictetus’ iatreion, which continues a long tradition of Socratic-Platonic medical analogies for philosophy, does not so much imply a therapeutic locale (like Plato’s Academic grove or Epicurus’ Garden) as a surgery where drastic treatments are administered.

By 1771, when Robinson established his public library, the psychei iatreion motto had become a humanist topos about the beneficial effects of learning underpinned by the old Socratic theme of philosophy as a cure for souls. It was glossed by Justus Lipsius in De bibliothecis syntagmata (Antwerp 1602), stamped in gold (in Swedish) by the librarian Erik Benzelius on the covers of voluminous books of the Royal University Library at Uppsala in 1710 and placed over the portals of the libraries of the monastery of Santa Croce at Fonte Avellana in the Marche (1733) and the ducale palace, Modena (1764). The most famous inscription of psychei iatreion, in a cartouche above the 1781 entrance created by Franz Anton Dirr to the magnificent library of St. Gall, post-dates Armagh by a decade.

Robinson’s expansion of psychei iatreion with the addition of definite articles into to tēs psy-
chēs iatreion in his epigraphic and numismatic inscriptions substantivizes the phrase into the emphatic designation of a concrete place; the library is the healing place for the soul. We might link this decisive assertion with the placing of the inscription on the street façade, rather than an internal portal – a unique deployment of the motto in the eighteenth century, to my knowledge.

For a reader today, there is a tension between the proclamation of spiritual or mental wellbeing on the façade of a public building and the elitist language in which it is announced. The unusual inscription of the date in Greek characters and the language in which it is announced suggest the centrality of the Greek inscription in Robinson’s conception, although his interest in Greek has not been otherwise documented. The inscription was undoubtedly topical in the sense that the library as repository of medicina animi (its early collections consisted mainly of theology, classics and history plus a rich architectural library and a near-complete set of Piranesi) stood between a venerable primal cathedral as place of care of souls and a newly-erected infirmary, as site for bodily cures.

This brings us to two conclusions about the library epigraph. First, it was a way of simultaneously presenting and restricting a public good. The phrase presented and restricting a public good. The phrase presented and restricting a public good.

Like Capel, for Robinson the ‘healing’ capacity of his library implied the banishment of profanities (profanum meaning literally before and thus outside the temple). We might recall in this regard that Robinson’s Armagh university project aimed to consolidate Protestant ascendency in Ireland and that he opposed relaxation of the Penal Laws which severely disenfranchised and oppressed the majority Irish Catholic population from the late seventeenth century until their gradual repeal, notably with the Catholic Relief Act (1793) and Catholic Emancipation (1829).

Robinson may have known the writings of his most illustrious Protestant primate predecessor, the foremost Irish Humanist scholar James Ussher (1581-1656) who argued that the early Irish church had been isolated and independent from Rome until the twelfth century, when St. Malachy’s reforms brought it into conformity with papal authority. Ussher’s works provided a narrative which could have bridged the scholarly achievements of the Insular church, famed for its transmission of Greek, with Robinson’s projects for a university city which would consolidate the Protestant ascendency.

Robinson’s choice of the architectural and numismatic motto for his library thus worked in various ways. It declared the library’s lineage in a series of famous libraries constructed by great builders, culminating with Rameses II (the pharaonic association also suggested by the obelisk). Robinson’s determination to ensure the library’s perpetuity was reflected in the 1773 Act of Parliament which established it as an independent institution; in the title and preamble to the
Act, the word “forever” appears no less than three times. Then there is the relationship between inscriptions and urbanism. If the Armagh psychēs iatreion motto was unique in its street appearance, its interaction with its civic context became more pronounced in the 1848 re-carving. The use of uncial lettering opened the epigraphic connotations to early Christian palaeography, and thence to the role in manuscript production – and the preservation of Greek – of the Innsular church, headed by Armagh. The re-carved inscription coincided in time with William Reeves’ scholarship on the early Irish church and antiquities, although Reeves did not become Keeper of Armagh library, for which he collected local antiquities, until 1861. The inscription thus endured yet modified to add a further dimension of significance to the “healing place of souls”, namely Armagh’s textual, intellectual and spiritual heritage as metropolitan see of the Irish Church. The library also occupied a site – at the corner of Abbey Street and Callan Street – within the ecclesiastical enclosure, or rath, of the medieval town, whose eastern entrance was marked with a 8th-9th century high cross which appears Richard Bartlett’s 1602 map and Black’s 1810 painting (fig. 3). The rath was the sacred precinct, the place of souls rendered in Humanistic terms in Robinson’s library inscription; amongst the buildings within the rath was Armagh’s first library, the Teach Sceapta or scrip-torium. Thus, the change of lettering style can alter or expand the connotations of epigraphy; if Robinson’s urbanism superimposed baroque-style planning over an Irish town, the nineteenth century re-inscription suggests remembrance of Armagh’s early history, its ancient library and scrip-torium, whose treasures were (briefly) restituted, as a further level of meaning. Armagh’s church history was also renovated from 1840 with the construction of the new Catholic cathedral of St. Patrick on a hill northwest of old St. Patrick’s. The memory held by the memorial is not fixed or static, but amenable to enrichment. If we recall Erasmus’ semantics in the Adagia, where the meaning of an adage develops in a cumulative fashion with the contexts of each usage, the inscriptions of Armagh library and observatory enrich the associations of the urban topography both by recalling earlier states of the city and widening their significance with its subsequent development.

We have seen how a later re-carving of the library inscription opened historic allusions which long predated the Enlightenment library created by Robinson. We might also note that the psychēs iatreion motto had unforeseeable connotations given the coinage of the term “psychiatry” by Johann Christian Reil in 1808 to designate a new branch of psychological medicine to complement internal (pharmacological) medicine and surgery. Reil’s conception of the interaction of chemical, mechanical and mental elements in all illness as “an affection of the one process of life” extends a Humanist motto to complement internal (pharmacological) medicine and surgery. As a town which suffered grievous casualties in the Northern Irish conflict of 1969-1994, when its rural hinterland, South Armagh, was the most heavily militarised zone in Western Europe, the therapeutic healing of “the one process of life” in Armagh is indeed topical. In terms of Armagh’s recent history, the library as “healing place of the soul” signals the fragility of cultural heritage in conflict zones and its inestimable value as a literal, not merely metaphorical medicina animi in recovering from the psychic and societal trauma of war. The civic context with which the library continuously interacts provides the horizons of meaning for the psychēs iatreion inscription beyond the personal pretensions of its founder.
In conclusion, we can review the multiple associations of the inscriptions on Robinson’s buildings. At surface level, there is the ambiguity for an audience today in the civic ‘healing’ of a public library proclaimed in an exclusive manner, or of a city renovated for optimal viewing as a landscaped prospect from an archbishop’s palace. We then pass into a deeper level of association, in which the eighteenth-century epigraphy is just one level in the strata of topographical-textual relationships which constituted the city, such as the processional recitation of psalms or hymns in circumambulation or the regalia which denoted possession of the primatial office – the *Book of Armagh*, St. Patrick’s Bell and the *Bachall Isu* with which Patrick traced the cathedral’s plot under angelic direction. Beyond these Christian legends lie the topographical myths of the *dindsenchas* which recount how Macha like Patrick traced the plot of Emain Macha with her brooch.

Armagh’s multi-valent topography encompassed an eighteenth-century urban project articulated by inscribed monuments, an area for astronomical observation marked by a circle of meridian markers and an ancient cathedral city with a radial-concentric organization which itself supplanted the older sacred site of Navan Fort, with its circular earthworks. The observatory inscription in this sense forms a line of connection back to the symbolism of a medieval cathedral city – which is not to claim that Robinson intended this association.

Robinson’s interest in inscribed objects (architectural epigraphy, numismatics, engraved gems) corresponds to the continuum of artefacts bearing imprese, from miniatures to monumental inscriptions discussed in Tesauro’s encyclopaedic manual of *concettismo*, *Il Canocchiale aristotelico* (Torino 1654). The semantic working of such objects is discussed by Erasmus in the prologue to the *Adagia* which describes how objects adorned with *sententiae* function topically, generating meaning via allusion and context. Thus, the precious engraved objects (gems, medals) acquired by Robinson and the engraved monuments which he erected can be seen in Humanist terms as a continuum of emblematic objects, which generated significance through textual-visual interplay, through intertextual allusion and through contextual or site-specific meanings. In this sense a group of inter-related inscribed buildings will be related through their axial alignments and civic functions, but also through their type and the other instances of the inscription, as we saw in the library, where even a change of lettering style opened new dimensions of meaning. What we find in Armagh is the overlay of this kind of Humanist contextual reading upon earlier narratives which brought together treasures, texts and sited meaning: the onomastic lore of the *dindsenchas* and medieval literature which insisted on possession of the *Book of Armagh* and *Bachall Isu* as the insignia of the bishopric.

We have argued that such contextual significance can continue to expand or accrue in the urban context, as the inscribed edifices continue to relate to the changing circumstances of the city – both progressive development and archaeological recovery. The case of Armagh shows that the relationship between topography, literature and significant artefacts extends back into pre-urban landscape myths and beyond the classical world.

Aitchison, Armagh... *cit.*, p. 267, quotes allusions in the *Liber angeli* and the *Book of Armagh* to processional recitation of psalms in circumambulation from the cathedral to the Teampall Na Ferta.