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**Letters in history–  
Power symbols from Augustus to Mussolini**

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Extracts

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## Introduction

### *The letters of the Pantheon*

The most famous, most visible, and probably most commented-on inscription in Rome is the one on the architrave of *the Pantheon*:

M•AGRIPPA•L•F•COS•TERTIVM•FECIT

The text *is* somewhat challenging, as there are clearly letters missing. But with all the letters in place, the inscription would look like this:

M(arcus) AGRIPPA L(ucii) F(ilius) CO(n)S(ul) TERTIUM FECIT

Or in its English translation: *Marcus Agrippa, son of Lucius, made this building when consul for the third time.*

The Marcus Agrippa (63 BC - 12 AD) mentioned here, was a childhood friend of Octavian (63 BC-4 AD), who later became Emperor Augustus. They sat together as consuls for three terms, and Agrippa became one of Augustus' leading generals and most trusted men. Later he married Augustus' only daughter Julia with whom he had a son, Lucius Caesar. Agrippa played a decisive role in the Battle of Actium in 31 BC, where Octavian defeated his challenger to power in Rome, Marcus Antonius; thereby contributing to the founding of a hereditary autocracy in the Roman Empire. To mark this victory, the Agrippa Pantheon was built around 27 BC. This Pantheon burned down in 80 AD, but was later rebuilt.

The letters on the Pantheon's facade are cast in bronze and mounted into slits cut into the facade. Admittedly these letters are not the original ones; most likely those disappeared sometime during the Middle Ages when bronze was a far too valuable commodity – in war and weapons technology – to be lavished on decorations. However, new letters were fitted into the original slots during the 1880s when the Pantheon underwent a major restoration. But even if these letters *are* from our time, we must assume that what we see here, are letters that look more-or-less as they did in imperial Rome.

These letters are our close acquaintances, we deal with them daily. But let us take a closer look at them anyway: The line structure is *duo-linear*; there are two sets of strokes: The heavier stems and the thinner hairlines. Distinct *serifs* mark where a letter-stroke begins or ends at the top and bottom. The transition between the strokes and the serifs is nicely rounded off. The round shapes – C, G, O – have a clear diagonal *axis*: The stroke is thickest at the bottom-left and upper-right,

something which gives the aperture a clear slant to the left. These are all details we might recognize in many of our own letters, helping to enrich the letters aesthetically, however their origins actually lie in *technology*. This feature of ancient Roman letters is an important factor that will pop up, again and again, during this presentation.

We usually say that we owe our letters to the Romans, and here, in the middle of Rome, nobody questions their presence; neither on this building from antiquity – nor on countless churches and monuments from the Renaissance and Baroque periods. It would be easy to imagine an unbroken line running from Pantheon's letters to modern day book-pages and computer-screens. The truth is, however, that these Roman monumental letters – at least in the form we find them on the Pantheon – disappeared from Rome and were out of use by the early 300s; and they were more-or-less gone as a consistent letter form for over a thousand years. At the beginning of the 1400s, there was no indication that these letters would adorn buildings in Rome once again, or find their way into the books produced by the first Italian printers at the end of the century. When the capital letters began to appear on newly erected memorials and buildings in the 1460s and 1470s, in fact many were confused. Sure enough the same letters were found on ancient ruins, but they were considered archaic and irrelevant, and difficult to read for most people.

### *The arch-presbyterian's donation*

If we turn from the stately inscription on the Pantheon's architrave, to the portico at the entrance, we may find the reason why the new letters caused a sensation. To the right of the large bronze door there is an almost unnoticeable stone-tablet, featuring completely different letter forms than those on the architrave. The tablet is from 1270 and has the following text:

*In the name of our Lord. Amen. In the year of our Lord 1270, the thirteenth of the indiction, on the second day of June, while the apostolic chair stood empty, Pandolfo della Suburra, who was the archbishop of the Church of Santa Maria Rotonda, and (here are the names and titles of some other clergy) make the bell tower and watches for the clergy in this church.*

The letter form here is dramatically different from that on the facade. Up there the letters are open, even, rather geometric "quadrata"; the shape is totally consistent, in that all instances of the same letter are exactly the same, and also because the different letters are, in form, related to each other.

The letters on the tablet in the portico have a more-or-less "misshaped" and "affected" form which in some cases only faintly resembles the shape of Roman capitals. E and M, which are stern and authoritative as capitals, have acquired a rounded and crooked shape, and in some cases there are two different versions of the same letter. The M bears little resemblance to its closest relative N,

they do not seem to belong in the same aesthetic and functional system. The clean and elegant serifs of the capitals have become awkward-looking clumps. H has acquired a kind of minuscule form with a regular ascender and also completely breaks with the consistency in letter form and the rhythm in the text. N comes in two shapes: one that resembles its capital, and one which is closer to a minuscule form. The tablet's whole appearance is aesthetically inconsistent, twisted, and introverted, in stark contrast to the confident monumental letters on the facade. It is more like a manuscript page than a monumental inscription. As a monumental text on the Pantheon's facade, these letters would appear out of place – they simply would not have fitted in.

It is clear that, initially, these letters had a completely different purpose and were used in a different way than the letters on the architrave. Classical Latin forms blend with Greek handwriting forms; epigraphic inscriptions blend with calligraphy. You do not have to be a writing expert to see that many of these letters are simply unsuitable for carving into stone. In reality, this is an epigraphic version of a handwriting style, but it can also be seen as an echo of the struggle – that persisted throughout the Middle Ages – between Rome and Constantinople, and between Christianity and paganism. As we shall see, this story has become enshrined in the form of the letters.

It was these letters that the inhabitants of Rome could see in epigraphic inscriptions through the later centuries of the Middle Ages. But over the course of a few decades in the late 1400s everything was turned on its head. Writing and letters, which in this period had become entirely absent from public space, returned to facades and monuments, and the epigraphic letter style became once again the classic *capitalis monumentalis*, albeit in a reinterpreted form. The change in letter style in Rome – and Italy for that matter – at the end of the 1400s, was dramatic and comprehensive, and had lasting consequences.

[...]

## Antiquity

### *The emperors' letters*

Capitalis monumentalis had a unique position in Roman society during the empire. The letter form had developed in a kind of ceremonial context over the centuries, a development that reached its peak in the second century AD. And it was during the empire, when Rome had become a unified and uniform state with one absolute emperor at the top, that capitalis acquired its most refined and consistent and stable form.

Capitalis monumentalis is a so called *majuscule* script; an independent alphabet without associated minuscule letters. All letters are of the same height without ascenders or descenders. The letters consist largely of straight lines, which is not surprising when we remember they were basically shaped by the meeting between chisel and stone. But round shapes were still required to create sufficient contrast between the Romans' letters. (The alphabet may be seen as an information system in which the amount of information – or form differentiation – in each element, must reach a certain level in order to create the necessary distinction between the elements.)

Due to the standardized height, the form lends itself to be written into a square, so this letter style has accordingly been named *capitalis quadrata*. “Quadrata” does not necessarily mean “square” in Latin, only “four-sided,” perhaps when compared to handwriting. The letters alternate in width, depending on their shape. E, F, L, P and T are relatively narrow, while C, N, M and O are wide. Perhaps we can say that each letter is as broad as it needs to be, based on its informational content – there is more “going on” in an M than in an E. Had E been as wide as M, it would have looked stiff and unnatural – and maybe a little empty? C and O also handle being wider, and not just because of their elegant circular shape. As we have noted earlier, the form is *not* perfectly circular – it is a little stretched. C also has a subtle “hump,” giving it more “tension” than a clean, circular arc. The stroke contrast also adds something, and there are other small deviations that make the curves dynamic, rather than cold and static. The M on the Trajan column is almost square, but it has a complex composition and contains a higher degree of information. R has an oversized counter, and the leg stretches far out in an elegant swing – noticeably it does *not* end in a serif. The M on the Trajan Column lacks top serifs, but as mentioned earlier, top serifs occur in most known inscriptions of the imperial era.

The letters' alternating widths gives life and rhythm to the words and text – the words are *alive* – just as a good literary text consists of alternating long and short sentences.

All the capital letters are formed as whole, independent entities. They are not all symmetrical, but they still hold a formal balance that makes them self contained – like tiny sculptures able to stand alone. (Minuscules cannot handle standing alone – they appear lost and meaningless without other

letters around them: miniscules are purely sentence building blocks, as is evident from their form.) These letters contain everything they need to be letters, but in addition they possess an important aesthetic dimension. All in all, this makes capitalis a unique letter form, perfectly adapted for a strategy of imperial expression in public spaces.

### *Clients and patrons*

The letter form we sometimes call “Imperial capitals” were not, of course, the emperor's letters in the sense that their use was restricted. They were used throughout almost all of Roman society. (There is one important exception to this that we will return to in the chapter on Christianity.) But of course the use of these letters was primarily linked to more prestigious, and costly projects. Nevertheless, there are thousands of small and large epitaphs – for people of a more common status – using the elegant monumentalis, or a simpler form, based on monumentalis. However, it is reasonable to assume that these letters evolved within a prestigious environment where their form was extremely well suited to the content and function.

Could these letters have occurred elsewhere and in other social conditions? Evidently, this is impossible to answer; however, to understand how they could attain such a position in Rome, we must point out a fundamental feature in Roman culture, and consider the social and political life in Rome.

Inconceivable riches flowed into Roman society from the occupied territories at the end of the republic and for the first two hundred years of the empire. They went, almost without exception, to the emperor, the warlords and the nobility. The poor were terribly poor and had, in practice, no influence nor legal protection. Despite the fact that they were Roman citizens and had the right to vote, they lived, to a large extent, at the mercy of the rich. People of the upper classes fought over prestige (*dignitas*) and honor (*honor*) and, perhaps most importantly, for an honorable reputation after death. A *patron-client* system evolved where those without influence sought protection from the rich and powerful. The *client* had a personal allegiance to his *patron* and had to support him by electing him to office and by military service. The upper class enticed clients by displaying their power and influence in public. Not only did they organize sporting events and grand parties, and provide food distribution – they also financed the construction and repair of temples, monuments and other public buildings.

Rome was a showcase for the empire. Anyone arriving must have been overwhelmed by the splendor and power represented by the palaces, temples, theaters, monuments and other public buildings. For the upper class, it must have brought a sense of confidence and security; for the lower classes, and for visitors, one of awe and submissiveness. “Our attitudes to the world and our surroundings are not only formed by literature, but perhaps to an equal degree by interaction with

our surroundings, by architecture and other visual impressions,” says Laura Sarah Nasrallah. We have to imagine that most of Augustus’ buildings were marked with the emperor’s signature, or that of someone in his family. It is easy to think that these letters must have been associated with the emperor, with the Roman empire and Rome’s ruling classes.

Inscriptions must have been extremely important in this context. On the Pantheon’s façade, for example, we can read that the building was built by “Marcus Agrippa, son of Lucius, when he was consul for the third time.” The inscription on the great triumphal arch in the Roman Forum tells us that Emperor Septimius Severus was “Son of Marcus ... pontifex maximus, in the eleventh year of his tribunician power, in the eleventh year of his rule, consul thrice, proconsul ...” Every single part of these inscriptions is important. Lineage and origin were crucial in the making of a career in ancient Rome, and nobody could climb to the top without going via lower offices. A dedication on a building facade may have been a good way to present yourself, and your power, in the public space. The Romans’ monumental letters were also used by people from the lower classes – the monument erected by Eurysaces the baker, over his wife’s grave at Porta Maggiore is one example, and there are many others less spectacular – but Imperial capitals were primarily associated with the ruling classes. You could say that this was a form of public writing, the ruler’s way of communicating with his people.

For the first time, letters had gained an aesthetic, a distinctiveness, a stability, and a level of prestige that could be associated with an institution – recognizable from place to place.

The monumental capitalis evolved in a social and political climate where its form was extremely well adapted to the purpose it was meant to serve. And, as we will soon see, they perished when the social system began to unravel, incomes stalled, the emperor abandoned Rome, and the upper classes withdrew to their vast rural estates.

We started this story with the *imperial* era – the most central period in the history of capitalis – and not with “the beginning.” We have presented and analyzed Imperial capitals as it appears on the more-or-less well-preserved monuments, from the beginning of the common era onwards. But Roman letters have a longer history, so we must make a chronological leap back in time to the republican letter culture. If we are to fully understand the imperial letter form, we need a point of reference.

[...]

## Christianity

### *A Christian book style?*

What could explain this shift from *rustica* to *uncial*? Rustic capitals had proven to be a vital and appealing script, highly prestiged among Latin writers; it required a certain degree of skill, but it was fairly quick to write and took up relatively little space. The Roman book industry itself had a high status and authority, and you would need a good reason to make changes against the writers' will. So, was the shift an initiative by the writers themselves, or was it a political move from above?

Christian epitaphs give us an idea of the dilemma that script- and letter form might have presented for the Christian church in Rome. This may have been a dilemma acknowledged by Constantine. Perhaps Roman scripts such as *capitalis quadrata* and *capitalis rustica* were too closely associated with a regime that until recently had inflicted the most cruel persecution and murder of Christians? Perhaps Constantine had to look around for another writing style that could mark the introduction of a new era – and distance itself from the old one? Or was there a more pragmatic reason: The new script was easier and faster to write, and – as we will see – it was already in the making.

Either way, there were many things to consider. Constantine was ruling an empire with two main languages: Latin and Greek. And not least, the church was bilingual. Christian literature and writing was still predominantly Greek, and many in the Christian churches in Rome spoke both Greek and Latin. In other parts of the empire Greek was the main spoken and written language.

Many letters in Greek script resembled uncials. It may have been a point to use a writing standard not too challenging for Greek speakers. But it could not deviate so much that it was totally unfamiliar and hard to read for the Latin-speaking Romans. Constantine even had to consider the Roman upper classes, who he needed on his side in promoting the new religion. These people could afford to buy literature, and had time to read it, and they did not have the early Christians' strained relationship with the old regime and its letter style. What kind of writing style would catch on in these circles?

Last but not least, it may have been a main point to unify East and West into a single script regime. It is unlikely that Constantine wanted to *deepen* the separation between Greeks and Romans by using two different writing styles, at least not while the empire was still united.

From 300 AD it is clear that uncial took over from rustica. But however the vast majority of preserved manuscripts written in uncial script – over 400 of them between the fourth and the eighth centuries – have biblical content. Prestigious works like Vergil's *The Aeneid* cannot be found in uncial at all, and only one classical poem is preserved, namely Ovid's *Epistulae ex Ponto*.

On the other hand, no biblical texts have been found using capitalis, in fact almost no Christian literature at all. Of course, this does not prove that biblical texts never *were* written in capitalis, or



that no valued literature was written in uncial. The lack of biblical texts in capitalis could be explained by them being lost in Diocletian's raid in 303 AD. But what is conspicuous is the clearly disproportionate number of surviving uncial texts. On the other hand, some early Christian texts are written in rustica.

Very little other than Christian literature was being written and copied at this time. Writing and reading resorted to the monasteries, and reading skills dropped among ordinary people.

[...]

## The Carolingians

### *Legibility or writability?*

It is usual to think of minuscule script as a major step forward compared to uncials and half-uncials. What strikes us is the clear and distinct, regular and formally consistent form of these letters – we perceive them as easier to read than the uncial. It is staggeringly close to being an “evolutionary” development: Carolingian minuscule came about because it was better than previous writing styles; it evolved step by step, and each step made it somehow superior to earlier forms.

Here, McKitterick points to an intriguing question: When we consider the Carolingian minuscule as more legible than earlier letter forms (and many since!), can we be sure this is an objective and prejudice-free assessment? Our printed letters are based on the humanist handwriting of the 1300s and 1400s, which in turn builds on Carolingian minuscule (see the chapter on the Renaissance). So there is an almost unbroken line running from the Carolingian minuscule to our lowercase letters, something which makes them easily recognizable to us. Could it be that we consider the Carolingian minuscule more readable *because it resembles our own*? McKitterick believes this is the reason we read this script so much easier than others. In other words – you read best what you read most.

There is of course an important element of convention in reading: Those used to reading Gothic, read Gothic better than those who are not used to it. However, my claim is that those equally used to reading *both* Gothic *and* Antiqua, will read Antiqua more easily than Gothic. This is of course a claim more or less impossible to verify, but I think it can be argued theoretically:

Reading is the decoding of visual information, and is based on the differences between the various letters. When the letters are almost identical, it becomes more difficult to separate them than when they are clearly different. Gothic letters – and this especially applies to Textura – have been forced into a stylistic form where the minuscules become intrinsically similar – letters c, e, i, m, n, o, r, u, v, w, are dominated by powerful, vertical strokes with oversized, diagonal serifs at the top and bottom. You could say that these elements, creating similarity, overshadow the elements that

create a difference. This contributes to emphasizing the similarity between the letters.

However, it is more difficult to use this argument in the case of uncial letters, which the minuscule letters replaced; they do not suffer from “uniformity” of shape in the same way Textura does. On the other hand, the uncial and – to a degree – the half-uncial letters, are fairly wide. Fewer letters fit on each line, and the reader must cover a longer “distance” to read the same content. Here ascenders and descenders become useful, as they add information to the letter form (read: differentiation) without exceeding its width. At a normal reading distance, the fixation point – the area where we see sharply – is only 18-20 millimeters in diameter. The more letters, or *parts* of letters, we can fit within the fixation point, the faster we can read. (Up to a certain limit. Everyone knows that when writing becomes too small, it becomes less legible.) Based on this we could claim that the Carolingian minuscule *actually was* superior to the uncial and half-uncial’s legibility, and that it most likely was perceived as such at the time.

*What drives script development?*

Is better legibility the driving force behind the development of the minuscule? Did minuscule acquire its shape in the pursuit of better legibility? Were the medieval scribes really concerned with the function of reading?

We take it for granted that legibility is an important criterion for a script’s functionality – perhaps *the* most important, when concerning texts. But in a culture where the production of manuscripts and books was based on writing technique and writing technology – the writing process itself was effectively a bottle-neck – then *write-ability* might have been an even more crucial factor. This was a time when letters were created on the fly, it was very difficult to make corrections; writing was instantaneous art. Parchment was also expensive and one needed a steady hand. The scribe *had* to think about efficiency and economics. Ligatures are one of many small tricks that Middle Age scribes invented to save time and space – and not all of these were in the service of legibility.

We must assume that minuscule letters have been a step forward from the *writer's* viewpoint. In this area, minuscules were superior to uncials and half-uncials. But they must also have represented a step forward for the *reader*.

Is it possible that the writers at Corbie and Luxeuil, more or less consciously, developed a script that was both more reader-friendly and writer-friendly? Were they aware of what makes a script more readable? We cannot know this for sure, but it is not very likely. One thing is to consider – subjectively – if one script is easier to read than another; but to anticipate the requirements for better legibility is something else. Tests have even shown that what most people consider to be the most legible, is not necessarily the case. What is more likely, is that the writers understood what

made a script more *writable*. Writability must have been easier to assess than legibility because it could be supported by measurable criteria, for example: the number of strokes per letter, the need to lift the pen from the paper, or simply by timing how long it takes to write a text. Legibility of single letters however, is difficult to measure without advanced optical instruments, while the reading speed of a large text requires systematic measurements.

But beauty and aesthetics must also have been an important factor. The scribes of the Middle Ages – and the Renaissance – took pride in their work and wanted to create beautiful products. It was not just about regular, well-formed letters, but also about the overall appearance of the page: the line spacing, the size and proportion of the margins, and other details which can be difficult to identify, yet are often contained in that which is “beautiful”. The most talented scribes must have been highly prized; beautiful books and documents were greatly valued by the buyers and the readers. We have to assume that the scribe’s skill was judged largely on the writing’s appearance – consistency, elegance and perhaps legibility?

But all script development has a built-in resistance: Reading, as already mentioned, is associated with convention; legibility is to some extent dependent on what you are used to. Writing is also subject to convention and tradition. We have already established that the Carolingian minuscule evolved over a long period of time, step by step – presumably controlled primarily by external influence and imitation. The process took centuries. We know that, in this period the scriptoria in the different monasteries borrowed literature from each other, to make new copies. Not only the text was copied, but also the script and the style, and this helped to develop a standardized form.

McKitterick also mentions what she sees as deliberate calligraphic experiments at Luxeuil with a writing style of its own. We have already mentioned that some scriptoria may have operated with varying “quality levels” for different purposes. This might strengthen the hypothesis that writability was of more concern than legibility; they adjusted their own effort according to the “status” of the target audience. All of which suggests that the scribes had a fairly purposeful relationship to their written letters. Obviously, they were bound by speed and efficiency requirements, but it was probably also important for a scribe to demonstrate his skill and artistic expertise, not least towards wealthy and high status audiences. He may well have considered that as important as the reader’s own interests.

Is it conceivable that the scribes put relatively more emphasis on aesthetics and beauty, than on functional legibility? Is it possible to imagine that a strong preoccupation on the part of the scribes with their own achievements, could lead the script in the *opposite* direction of legibility and writability?

How else can we explain that the readable and writable Carolingian minuscule – during the 1000s and 1100s – was gradually transformed into the far less readable and presumably less writable *textura*?

Nevertheless, it is a long way from this step-by-step development to the *innovation* and *design* of today. Innovation is about new development in response to an established need. Design is a modern phenomenon, which concerns development through a goal-oriented process where different factors such as target audience, functionality, productivity, economics, aesthetics, etc. are weighed-up against each other. Modern font design is a similarly goal-oriented process: Mass production and advanced technology means that the designer can focus more on usability, and opportunities in the market, than on reproducibility. But today's font-designers also take pride in their work, and have ambitions to follow, and their own status to protect.

[...]

## **The Renaissance**

### **The Church and the new script**

#### *The Pope in Rome*

In the mid-1400s, the papacy had rid itself of the convulsions from the schism, and Avignon, and aimed to make Rome, once again, the center of Christianity. The humanists, most concerned with liberating themselves from the church's dogmas, looked to antiquity and Rome's glorious past, viewing the art and culture of antiquity as their ideal. But the church and the humanists had the same goal: Rome shall regain its former position as *caput mundi*.

The medieval and renaissance church was dogmatic and self-righteous: on the one hand there was "the right doctrine" and the righteous who followed it – on the other hand, there were heretics and unbelievers. After all, the Rome of antiquity was associated with paganism, and it is difficult to see how the culture of antiquity could be introduced at this time across the Christian community. But that is exactly what happened: The ceremonials and the symbolism around pagan Rome was inevitably linked to the ancient monuments, and the pope must have known that a rebirth of ancient greatness could not happen without its symbols coming as well.

"From the mid-1400s, the papacy changed radically," says John Norwich. The Renaissance popes were influenced by humanist ideas, "these were the energetic and ambitious men of this

world – not only did they want to restore Rome to its former glory, but also to create a new city that united the best of both classical and Christian civilization”. They made no discrepancy between humanism and the Christian faith.

When Gregory XI (ca. 1329-1378, pope from 1370) moved the papacy from Avignon back to Rome in 1377, he found a city marred by poverty, litter and decay. It must have been difficult to imagine how it could, once again, become Italy’s new cultural power-center and the center of Christianity. And yet it would be forty years; partly with incompetent popes, and partly with inner conflicts in the church; before there was time and resources – and personages – for the clean-up. The church’s inner conflicts had been costly, and had left the pope with an empty purse.

### *Sixtus IV — the first renaissance pope*

Nicholas V (1397-1455, pope from 1447) tackled the most important things: The city’s defenses, and the supply of water. But the first really great city renewer was Sixtus IV della Rovere (born 1414), who was pope from 1471 to 1484. He was a Franciscan, a highly respected theologian and skilled preacher, and is considered by many as the first real renaissance pope. Sixtus immediately launched a large-scale program to rebuild Rome. The city should surpass Florence, Venice and Milan, not only in power and splendor, but as a political and artistic power center.

Sixtus was totally unscrupulous, both when it came to spending money and when it came to acquiring it. He was notorious for his nepotism, he took the practice of *indulgences* to new heights, and sold grand ecclesiastical offices; for instance the archdiocese of Lisbon was handed out to an eight-year-old boy.

One of his first projects was the restoration of the old bridge *Pons Aurelius*, which had been destroyed in 772 and was now extremely neglected. The bridge was repaired and completed in 1473, in good time for the jubilee in 1475 when many pilgrims were expected to arrive in Rome. Sixtus named it after himself: Ponte Sisto, and two plaques were placed on its east side with inscriptions marking the restoration and praising the pope.

On the left side it says:

*You who cross by the kindness of Sixtus the Fourth, pray God that he may long keep and preserve for us our Supreme and most excellent Pontiff. Farewell, whoever you be, once you have offered this prayer.*

On the right side it says:

*For the convenience of the people of Rome and of the multitude of visitors bound for the Jubilee, Sixtus the Fourth, Supreme Pontiff, with great care and at great expense rebuilt from its foundations this bridge, which in former times they justly called "Broken", and willed that should be called "Sisto" after his own name.*

Paul Shaw considers these inscriptions to be the very peak of 14th century lettering art, and the style can be recognised in several later inscriptions. (The plaques found on Ponte Sisto today are not the original ones. They were removed in the 1990s during renovations, and replaced with "copies." These do show the text, but the letters are an embarrassing mimicry of the original, good only for leading lettering enthusiasts astray. In no way do they give a correct picture of the letter design used on the original inscription, which is said to have been made by Bartolomeo Sanvito.)

Sixtus ordered the repair and reconstruction of over thirty of Rome's churches. Among these were Santa Maria del Popolo, which in practice became a mausoleum for his own family, Della Rovere. Santa Maria della Pace is one of the seven churches Sixtus built from scratch. He restored the Santo Spirito Hospital near the Vatican – a hospital to this day – he cleaned and restored Aqua Virgo, which supplies water to the Trevi Fountain – at his own expense – and he moved the market square from Capitoline to Piazza Navona. Last but not least, he financed The Sistine Chapel. But most important of all, was the laying of new streets; old, dilapidated buildings were demolished, open spaces were created, and narrow, crooked streets were replaced by wider and straighter ones.

At the corner of Via dei Balestrari and Via dei Giubbonari, in the southwestern corner of Campo de' Fiori, is a tablet with a text praising Sixtus for his renovation of Campus Martius:

*Field of Mars, you who were lately rotten and filthy with noisome muck, and full of hideous decay, with Sixtus as your prince you lay aside this foul aspect. Everything is resplendent with spruce spaces. A fitting reward is due to the salutiferous Sixtus. How indebted is Rome to her supreme ruler!*

This tablet is from 1483, and the letters are in the same style and design as the original plaques of Ponte Sisto.

We have to return to Damascus at the end of the 300s to find a pope who so purposefully and systematically used inscriptions, letters, and letter-style to commemorate his own – and the church’s – presence in Rome. Sixtus left his signature wherever he went, in the form of plaques and monumental inscriptions in the new *lettera antica*. As early as 1471, the year he became a pope, he marked the inauguration of the Museo Capitolino with a memorial tablet (now hanging in Palazzo Nuovo) using the capitalis letter form, albeit more Florentine than classical Roman. The following year two papal decrees were added to the church wall of Santa Maria del Popolo, one on each side of the entrance, to mark Sixtus’ restoration of the church. The texts are extensive – 28 lines in total – and the letters are small, but the letter form is now unmistakably classical, and in the same style as at Ponte Sisto. As we mentioned before, Andrea Bregno may have been involved with one or both of them. It is at this time that the inscriptions from Bregno’s hand stabilize in both form and craftsmanship. One can imagine that the production of such a long text must have been quite a challenge when it came to the actual execution; it must have provided good training in both painting and chiseling. A long succession of memorials followed, bearing inscriptions in this style; from Andrea Bregno, Bartolomeo Sanvito, Mino da Fiesole and others.

### *Lettera Sistina*

From then on, Sixtus is perhaps the most important and prolific “user” of the reborn *capitalis antiqua*. Not only the pope, but also his officials and the whole Catholic church in Rome threw themselves upon the “wave.” Sant’Agostino, one of the first Renaissance churches in Rome, dates from 1483 and was built by Guillaume d’Estouteville (1403-1483), the Pope’s *camerlengo*, his finance minister in practice. The facade is adorned by the builder’s signature in the best classical style:

*Guillaume d'Estouteville, Bishop of Ostia, Cardinal of Rouen, Camerlengo in the Holy Roman Church, built this in 1483.*

The first Renaissance palace in Rome, Palazzo della Cancelleria, is built between 1489 and 1513 by d’Estouteville’s successor in office; Rafaele Riario (1461-1521), Sixtus IV’s great nephew. The frieze running between the first and second floors, along the entire façade, constitutes a subtle, but important decorative element in the facade’s architecture, which is otherwise quite simple and in the classical spirit. Both this and the inscription at Sant’Agostino are in many ways “perfect,” there are no visible variations in the design of the individual letters. Both were carved during the period in which Andrea Bregno created his tombs around Rome. It could be the stonemason’s tribute to

Bregno, and his colleagues at the academy, at least with regard to the Cancelleria inscription. Some letters; e.g. A, M and R have details that are strikingly similar; there is even a concurrence in the asymmetry of the A and M's lower serifs. Bregno's painted epitaphs may have been the model; but this is not the work of any brush, a great deal suggests that these letters were drawn using stencils. The spontaneous and vibrant character of Bregno's lettering is missing. It could seem as though Bregno's technique was reserved for smaller formats.

The early renaissance variant of Roman Capitals has been seen as so closely connected to Sixtus IV that history writers have later called it *Sixtine*. How aware was Sixtus of the letter form? His main concern, as the supreme authority of the church and the de facto ruler of Rome, has of course been to show his face in public – to the city's inhabitants, and not least to visitors. But he has undoubtedly been highly aware of the letters he used to present himself. As a humanist and an intellectual, he would have been associated with other intellectuals and with the leading artists of the day. And both the artists and the spiritual elite would have been interested in the new letters. It is fair to assume that the new letter form must have been a talking point – the shift from Roman and Gothic letters, to lighter Antiqua must have been a huge upheaval. Nobody would go unaffected by it and, in Sixtus' circle, people would have known what that meant. The shift to the classic letter form was quite simply an important and concrete part of humanistic ideas, and of the whole Renaissance. By displaying his name in antique letters, Sixtus linked himself and the papacy to Rome's glorious past and to the Roman emperors as rulers and authorities. He cannot have been indifferent to that.

The shift appears to have come gradually. It begins with the Florentine capitals script in the *Museo Nuovo* on The Capitoline Hill in 1471. Then in 1473, came Sanvito's inscription on Ponte Sisto and Bregno's tablets on Santa Maria del Popolo. However a decree in the Vassalletto monastery and a plaque in San Cosimato in Trastevere – both as late as 1475 – show no sign of Bregno's brush. As a rule there would normally be some wavering during a transition period, but there is no doubt that the church quickly understood that the new antiqua was closer to Antiquity than the Florentine. But we cannot expect that someone as busy as Sixtus had control over every single plaque put up in his name.

The rebirth of classic lettering in the latter half of the 1400s was ideologically founded. It was the ideas of the humanists and their search for classical values that led to capitalis' renaissance. Sixtus' use of them, however, may look more like a strategic maneuver, in the same spirit as Augustus' "politicization" of the Roman capitalis quadrata. Like Augustus before him, Sixtus made Rome a showcase for these letters. Rome had now definitively taken back the initiative when setting the standard for monumental inscriptions – and would keep it that way for centuries. Just over a thousand years after the classic letter forms had played their role as an imperial power symbol, they – slowly but surely – reconquered Rome's urban spaces, this time as the insignia of the Papacy.



It may be worth noting that while the antiqua letters were in many ways the lettering of humanism and the catholic church, the gothic letters of Gutenberg and the German book printers became the script of Protestantism.

[...]

### **Capitalis in the sign of fascism**

*Roma o morte!*

In a beautiful park at the top of Gianicolo, midway between Bramante's Tempietto and the imposing Fontana dell'Acqua Paola, stands a memorial surrounded by pines and cypresses. Mausoleo Ossario Garibaldino was built in 1941 in memory of the liberating soldiers who died during the battle taking place here in 1849, between Italian nationalists led by Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807-1882) and French mercenary troops, loyal to the pope.

Since the Middle Ages, the Pope had not only been the spiritual authority in Rome, but in the absence of any political governance, he had also been its worldly ruler. The rest of Italy had, for hundreds of years, consisted of small and large city-states. The idea of a united Italy – *il Risorgimento* – began taking shape after the Vienna Congress in 1815. After uniting most of Italy, Garibaldi and the nationalists claimed Rome as the capital under the battle-cry of “Roma o morte” – Rome or death. Many were killed, and Garibaldi had to consider himself defeated – at least for the time being.

The mausoleum is built using travertine and is shaped like a triumphal arch with openings on four sides – it is at once airy, minimalist and monumental. The whole monument and its ornamentation is modernist, yet it has clear associations with antiquity. On the front wall are two dates: 1849 and 1870. It was in 1870 that Garibaldi's *bersaglieri* finally managed to break through the city wall at Porta Pia and take the city, thereby ending the Pope's long reign. Along the top of all four sides runs the inscription “ROMA O MORTE”. The internal walls have various patriotic

inscriptions, and at the back there is an entrance to a crypt, featuring a gilded ceiling mosaic, and walls displaying the names of all those who died in battle up here.

The monument was built in 1941, and despite the fact that Mussolini is not mentioned by name, there is no doubt that he was behind it. That he wanted to turn the spotlight on “il Risorgimento” in this way, is not strange, the patriotic struggle for Italy’s unification fits in with the vision of an Italian *empire*. Mussolini saw the Roman triumphal arch as the symbol of an eternal Rome, and the monument’s design underlines the historic connection. The shape of both the letters and the monument as a whole, is an interesting and clearly deliberate balance of tradition and modernism, both of which – and balance in itself – belonging to the ideological foundations of fascism.

It is the letters on this monument that are interesting to us. These letters have a pure capitalis form, but in their details they are miles away from the letter forms on Trajan’s Column. These letters are powerful, without serifs or contrasting stroke widths; they are what we call, by today’s terminology, *sans serif* or *grotesque*. This is capitalis, but not the Imperial capitalis. If the letters and the text had been detached from their monumental context, nobody would think of antiquity – quite the opposite. The letter form is almost art deco in style; many of the letters have a slightly exaggerated shape: The crossbar on the A has been pulled way down, the circular arc of the C is reduced to a mere hint of an arc, G also has a stylized shape, and the letters P and R have oversized bowls. The letter shape is being played with, but within a given frame, and the whole effect is stylish and beautiful.