

THE ORIGIN OF THE SERIF
BRUSH WRITING &
ROMAN LETTERS

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Edward M. Catich

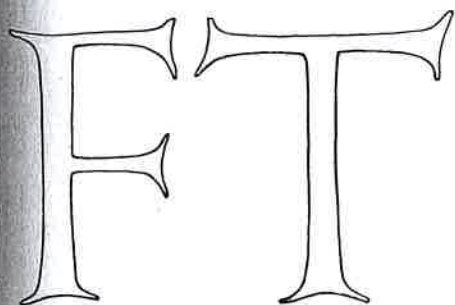
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Second Edition
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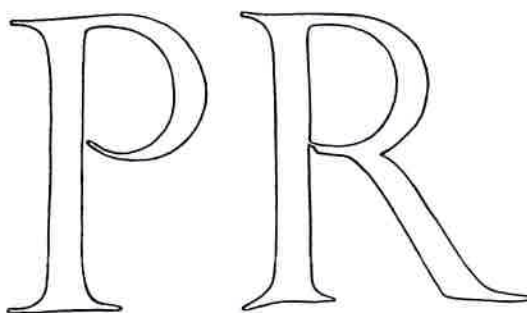
Deep & shallow V-cuts



f it is true that cutting the inscription below the surface of the stone preserved the writing, should it not follow that a deep V-cut would be even better protection? The reasoning is only partly valid. As in other protective schemes, there is an area of diminishing return or needless over-protection. Thus a V-cut one inch deep is not twice as well protected as a cut one-half inch deep.



J.H. Benson = 



Eric Gill = 

Fig. 78. Letters with their V-sections, redrawn from two alphabet stones in the Newberry Library, Chicago.

For example, the Trajan letterer had learned through long experience, or through craft tradition, how deep (Fig. 74) to make his V-cut (surprisingly shallow when compared with the V-cuts of such modern masters as Eric Gill, Will Carter, and John Benson). The fact that the Trajan Inscription is still eminently readable after eighteen and a half centuries of weathering and vandalism confirms the correctness of its shallow V-cut angle. The illustrations in figure 78 are carefully copied from rubbings and V-cut angle and depth measurements of alphabet stones cut by Eric Gill and John Benson and now in the permanent collection of the Newberry Library, Chicago.

In his tract on stone lettering Eric Gill advised a "... study of the best examples of Inscriptions: such as that on the Trajan Column. . ." in Appendix B to Edw. Johnston's *Writing & Lettering*, page 355. But in his own work he ignored entirely the shallow V-cutting of the Trajan Inscription. Moreover in his written instructions for stone-cut letters he said, "For incised letters, a "V" section of about 60° is best for regular use; deeper rather than shallower." Ibid., page 369.

Deep V-cutting has been defended in Great Britain (when I questioned the deep V-cuts) and New England on the premise that "... we do not have a sun as strong as that in Trajan's Rome where shallow V-cutting may have been normal." But the defense is not pertinent for it still revolves around shadows.

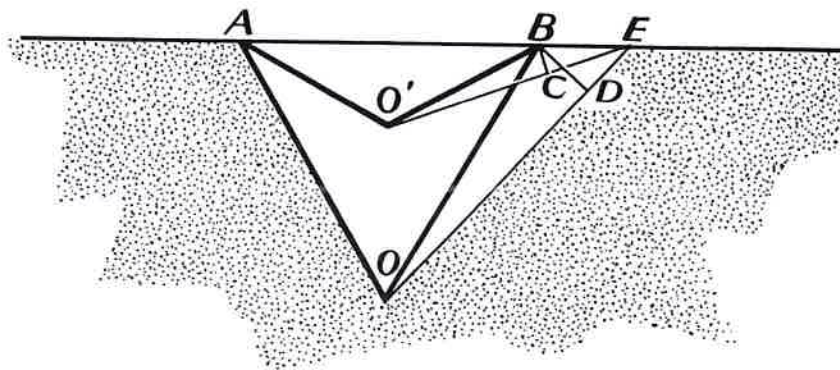


Fig. 79. A comparison of cutting mistakes in deep and shallow V-cutting.

It is easier for beginners and advanced amateurs to cut letters with deep V-cuts, but it takes more time since more stone is cut away. It is thus quicker, though more dangerous, to use a shallow cutting angle.

It is the edge between the V-cut and stone surface that is the cutter's goal, for this edge marks the outlines of the inscription letter. A mistake while cutting shallow V-cuts is more damaging to this letter edge than a similar mistake in deep V-cut letters. This is quite plain from the diagram in figure 79 showing shallow V-cutting (angle AO'B) and deep V-cutting (angle AOB). It is obvious that BD, the amount of error made by the chisel in deep cutting, is greater than BC, a chisel mistake in shallow cutting, yet both chisel-cutting mistakes (BC and BD) produce the same amount of surface error, BE.

It follows that it *takes more skill*, greater control, and sensitivity to cut shallow V-cuts. The skillful worker in every craft, after long experience, inevitably learns the best, surest, most efficient and *quickest* means

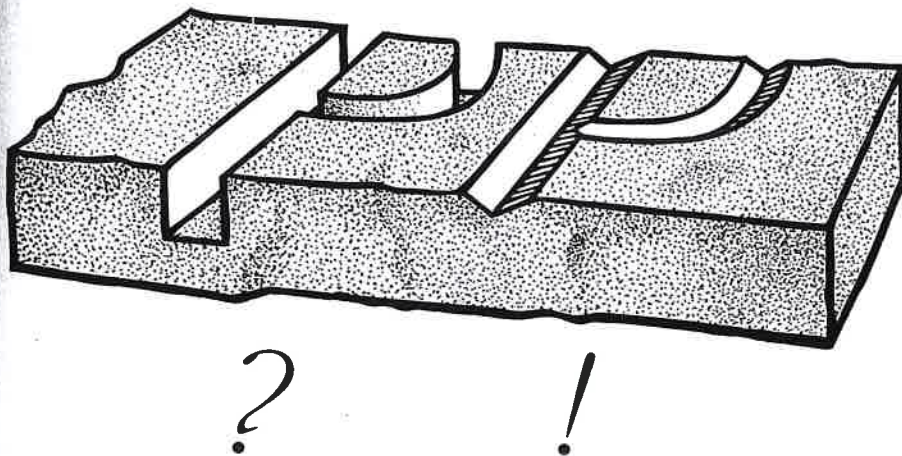


Fig. 80. The possibility of edge injury in deep and shallow V-cutting.

for obtaining the ends of his art, and he eliminates as well all time-wasting, unnecessary movements and methods.

Strictly speaking a shallow V-cut will stand up better against edge-injury. The steeper the angle between side and face of stone the greater

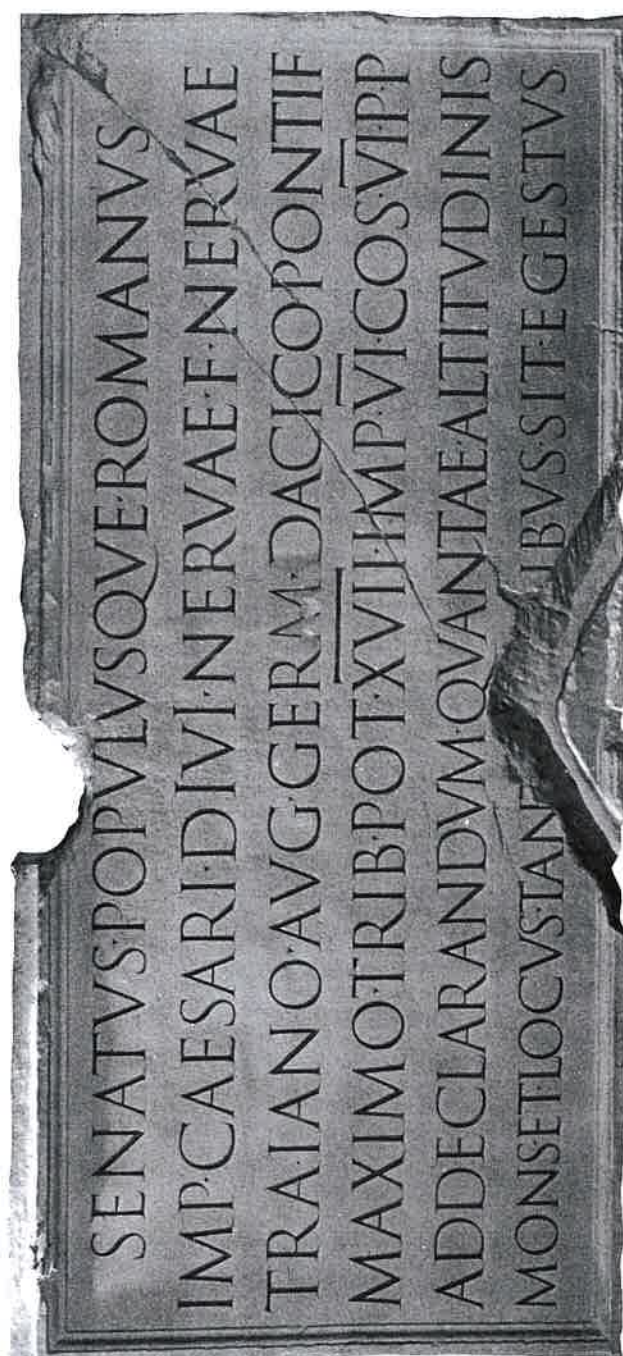


Fig. 81. The R. R. Donnelley cast of the Trajan Inscription.

the danger of chipping the edge; conversely a lesser angle reduces this danger. That is, a square edge on a stone will break more readily than a chamfered edge, hence, strange as it seems, shallow cutting adds to the life expectancy of the incised letter.

The fundamental quality of Roman letters — as with all flat graphic statements — is contrast. One does not paint silver letters on an aluminum background nor black letters on slate. In chiselled letters the V-cut shadow, under ordinary conditions, is just not strong enough for easy reading of the inscription. It must be strengthened by the contrast of paint or gilding.

Figure 81 is a photo of a polyester cast of the Trajan Inscription. I made this casting of the original inscription in Rome for the Lakeside Press of the R. R. Donnelley Company of Chicago. The dark gray polyester was painted off-white to simulate the color of the Grecian marble in



Fig. 82. Paint and shadow in a section of the R. R. Donnelley polyester cast.

which the Roman letters are cut. The letters in the cast were then painted orange-siena to suggest the appearance of ancient Roman inscriptions in general and the Trajan Inscription in particular. Large, obvious breaks in the letters were left unpainted. It occurred to me while painting that this polyester cast could also be made into a witness against those who defend shadows in incised letters. Accordingly I omitted the paint from several letters of the first and second lines of the Inscription. These unpainted letters flanked by painted ones (Fig. 82) were then photographed outdoors in order to get deep and normal sun shadows. It is obvious which letters serve legibility better.

It should be reasonably clear, then, that the ancients gave no heed to cast shadows. It follows that the Roman calligrapher thought of letters, not as 3-dimensional, but as 2-dimensional, linear entities only. This point needs emphasis as we shall discover when we take up the primacy of the written shape among the Romans. One may say, then, that in essence the Roman inscription letter was linear although accidentally it has a V-cut, 3-dimensional existence.

