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Treasury of Alphabets and Lettering

A SOURCE BOOK
OF THE BEST LETTER FORMS
OF PAST AND PRESENT
FOR
SIGN PAINTERS
GRAPHIC ARTISTS
COMMERCIAL ARTISTS
TYPOGRAPHERS
PRINTERS · SCULPTORS
ARCHITECTS
AND SCHOOLS OF ART
AND DESIGN



LUND HUMPHRIES
LONDON

THE OLDER LETTER FORMS

THE history of our alphabet begins with the letters of the ancient Romans. They are the letters used at the time of Cicero and Caesar. The Romans, however, did not invent their letters. They took over the Greek alphabet as used by Greek colonists in Southern Italy, replacing some unsuitable characters with others. Some Greek characters were adapted to symbolize different Roman sounds.

The Roman letters reached their highest perfection at the end of the first century after Christ after an evolution of about a hundred years. The most beautiful example is the inscription on the Trajan column in Rome (pages 50 to 53). These letters, called *capitalis romana*, which are on the average 4 inches high, were painted on the stone with a flat brush and then incised with a chisel. The soft swelling of the curves are the result of the brush used like a pen. The well articulated endings of the letters owe their form to the artist's intention to decisively finish the line on the top and on the bottom. The proportions of this justly acclaimed alphabet are of great nobility and have rarely, if ever, been surpassed. The Trajan column lettering continues to be the source from which all our type styles derive.

For their books the Romans used a reed pen cut to form a broad edge. They developed two letter forms, a slow and a fast one. The slow letter is called *quadrata* (page 54a and b). One of its variations (54a) was written with a pen which had a straight-cut edge held almost parallel to the base line of the letter. Another variation shows a more slanted position of the pen (54b), that is, the edge was cut to be held at an angle to the base line. The *rustica* (54c), written with a pen cut at an even steeper angle, could be written faster. Quadrata and rustica are the formal book letters of the ancient Romans. The writing they used for correspondence was done with a stylus on wax tablets or with a very narrow reed pen on papyrus. It was the *early Roman cursive*. Roman inscriptions and Roman book letters are of equal height. In the early Roman cursive, however, several parts of the letter protrude beyond the upper and lower lines. This handwriting is the forerunner of a new letter style, the *uncial* (55b, 55c, 56a, 60). The uncial not only shows several ascenders and descenders, but also rather frequent curves which replace formerly straight lines. E, D, H, M are now round. L, D, H have ascenders, P and Q descenders. The uncial has variations of upright (55b, 56a, 60) and slanted pen positions (55c). The later Roman period used a *later Roman cursive* (56b) for its handwriting. Its forms are similar to those of the uncial. Ascenders and descenders are used as a means to increase legibility. These are even more distinct in the *half uncial* (56c). The characters d, b, f and a resemble our lower case letters. A particularly beautiful half uncial was used in Ireland and England; the Book of Kells (57) is the most magnificent example. This gospel book shows slow letters of great perfection.

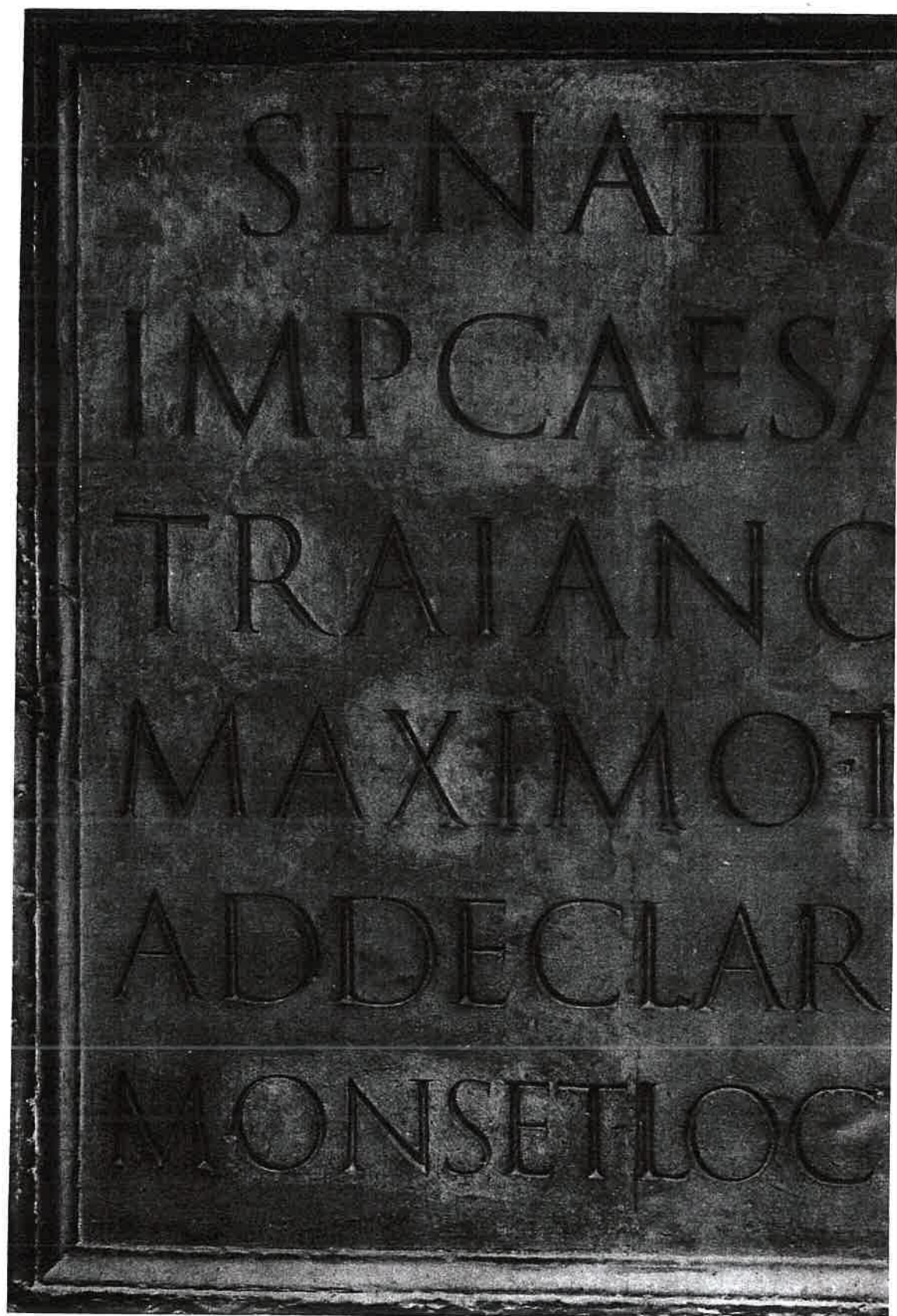
The most important event in the history of Western letters was the formation of the *Carolingian minuscule* (58, 59, 61, 62). It was the thoughtful creation of Bishop Alcuin of York, whom Charlemagne called to his court, to take charge of educating

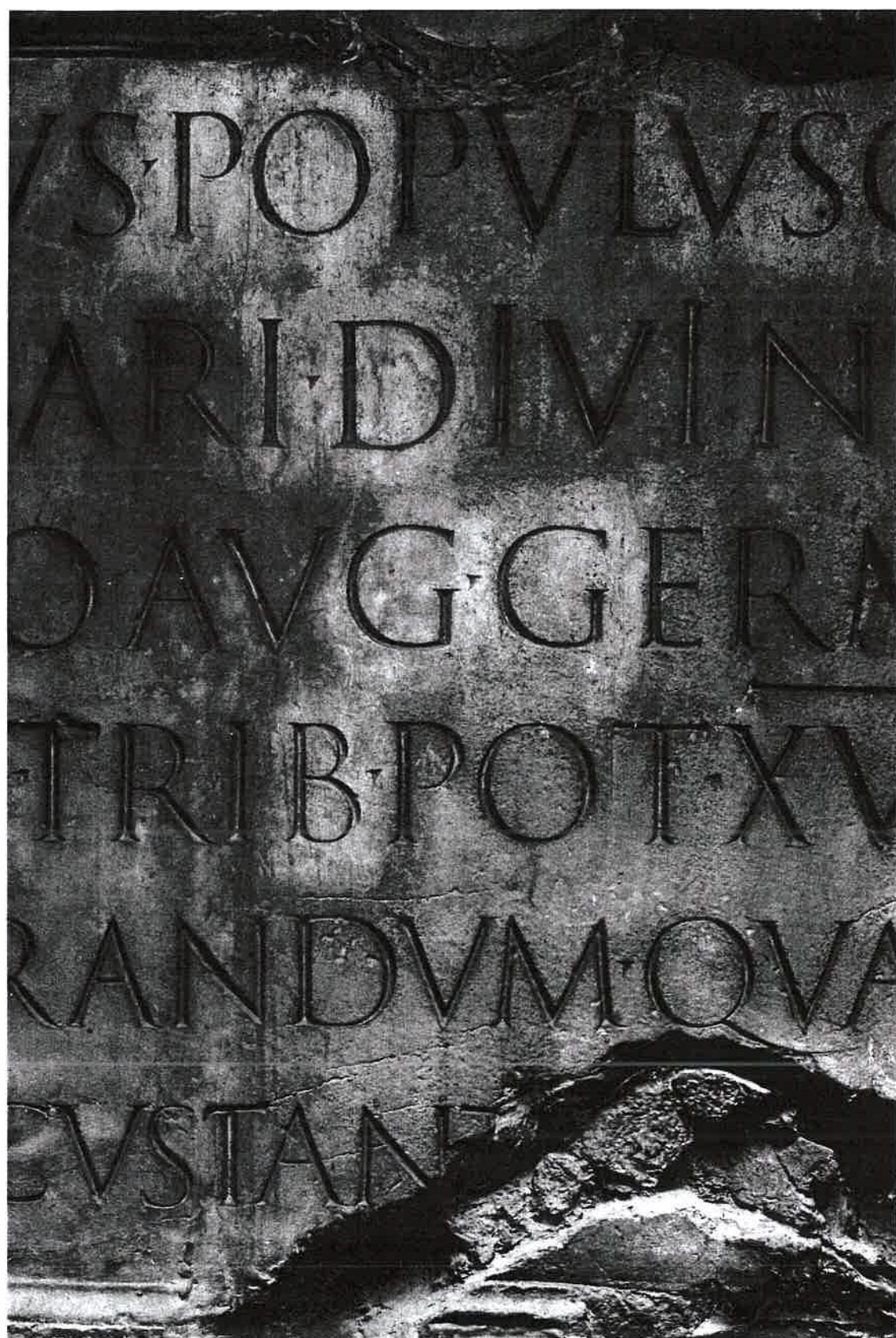
his people. The Carolingian minuscule is the first genuine minuscule or lower case letter, and closely resembles our lower case characters. The lower case t still does not have a peak, but the n, one of the most important letters, has already found its modern form. These letters were written rather speedily with a very broad pen held at an angle to the base line.

It was not only the change in the style of the period which slowly broke the round forms of the Carolingian minuscule. There was also a quest for knowledge on the part of the priests, the only ones at the time who could read and write, and they demanded more and more theological literature. Lettering became more hasty, compressed and angular. Finally, angularity and compression were elevated to a style principle. The result was the *blackletter*. The pointed, angular blackletter, also called *Textura* (64, 65, 67, 73), used in the north of Europe, is distinguished from *round Gothic* or *Rotunda* (63, 72) which still shows some curves, has not completely departed from the Carolingian minuscule, and was used primarily in Italy and Spain.

At the end of the Middle Ages a new letter style emerged which was a conscious copy of the Carolingian letters. With the exception of the dot over the i which now appeared, the calligraphy of the early Italian Renaissance often can hardly be distinguished from that of the Carolingian period. The new letters, however, soon assumed somewhat independent form (74, 75, 78). Today's roman typefaces are based on it since it served the early printers as a model (76). This written *Humanistic minuscule*, or *lettera antica*, was a book letter. The handwriting of the Italian Renaissance, the *Humanistic cursive*, which was soon known as *Cancellaresca* (79, 80, 81), could be written faster, and was really new. It served as a model for our *italic* typefaces, the sister of roman.

As yet the art of lettering was in the hands of papal or court scribes. But meanwhile printing had been invented and took over all book making. The calligrapher was left to apply his art to penning contracts and to teaching.





A B C

D E F

G H I J

K L M

N O P

Q R S

T U V

X Y Z