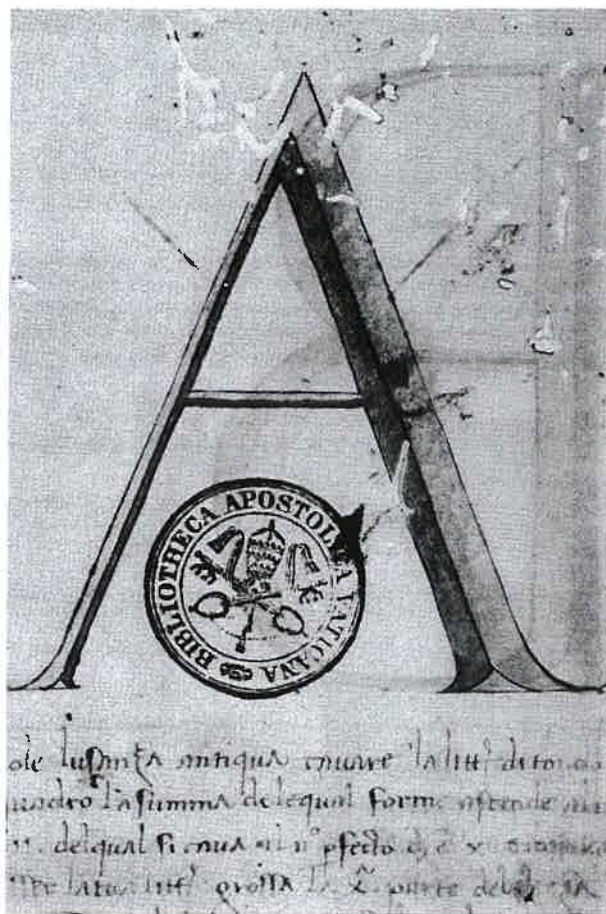


Drawing by Felice Feliciano, c. 1463.
Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana.
Col. Vat. Lat. 6852



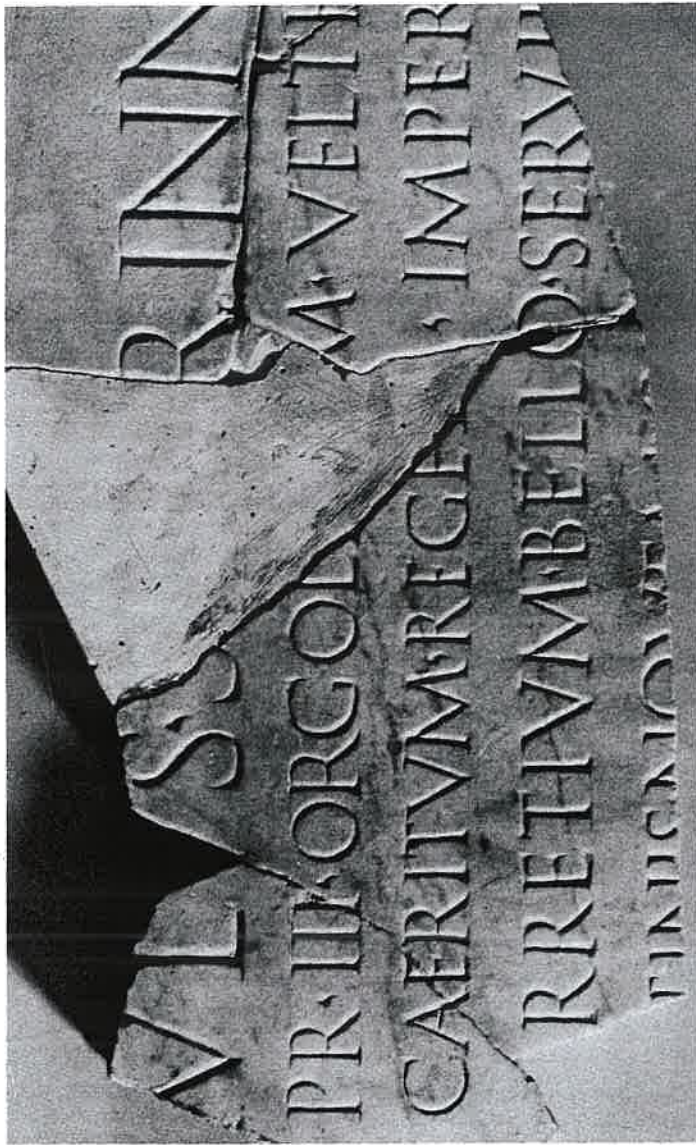
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LETTERS



JAMES HUTCHINSON

THE HERBERT PRESS



Museo di Villa Giulia, Rome.

Manuscripts in the Latin alphabet go back to the first century A.D. The history of Latin writing can be divided generally into five periods. Each can be distinguished by its characteristic group of handwritings, which were:

Writing of the Roman period.

Runes and National handwritings.

Carolingian minuscules.

Gothic minuscules.

Humanistic writing and modern Gothic hands.

During each period, there were many subdivisions.

For example, the writing of the Roman period was of several kinds, which included capitals and modifications of them.¹

WRITING OF THE ROMAN PERIOD

In the early empire, the Romans used two forms of letters, capital and cursive. The capitals were square-shaped or rustic. They were used for inscriptions and other writing requiring prominence. The cursive characters were the originals of our lower-case letters and were used mainly for correspondence.

MAJUSCULES

In early Latin writing, large letters were called "majuscules," and there were two kinds.

The first were capitals, originally cut in stone, or, to a lesser extent, inscribed on clay and metal. The shapes of the letters were made by strokes meeting at angles. Curves were avoided except where the letters required curves, because straight lines were more easily cut in stone or metal.

The earliest stone cut Roman capitals were without thick and thin strokes. In the first century A.D. it became a common practice to cut monumental inscriptions, and this led to the creation of highly developed letterforms. Many, apparently, were carefully painted on stone before cutting. An examination of incised letters cut about 100 A.D. shows that the strokes in the Roman capitals vary in thickness, as they continued to do until the early 1800s.

The swelling of the curves occurred about the centers on the right side and below the centers on the left sides of the letters. Also, the letters varied in their individual widths. The variety of the width of the strokes was caused by the natural handling of a brush, rather than a chisel, which influenced the shaping of the stone cut characters.

PATREM BV
D COGNIT

It is believed that the disparities in the letters' various widths relate to their pictorial origin. The earliest



Museo di Villa Giulia, Rome.

c. 200 ■ The art of woodcut on paper was practiced in China. It arose out of the use of a wooden stamp to make decorative, ideographic, and symbolic impressions in clay and wax.

phonetic signs, which evolved from pictograms by a process of conventionalization and simplification, retained traces of pictograms. The spaces that were needed to represent different objects used in pictograms varied just as the

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objects varied. The spaces required to present new forms might easily have varied in the same way.²

The second kind of written majuscules were modifications of capitals, called uncials. In uncials, curves could be easily rendered, since they were written with a pen.

Going back to written capitals, there were two kinds: square and rustic. Square capitals were used in writing more important works from the second to the fifth century. They were generally more formal and closely resembled the letterforms cut in stone. Right angles were preferred in the letters. Written square capitals differed mainly from stone-cut letters in the contrast of the thick-and-thin strokes—which was greater when written—and in the look of the serifs created by a pen stroke.

Serifs were a finishing stroke presumably used to optically strengthen the ends of strokes, usually at the top and bottom of letters. When letters were cut in stone, a chisel was used in such a way that at the end of the line—say the top and bottom of the letter I—the letter was widened and finished, producing a bracketed terminal. (The letters you are reading have serifs which are bracketed.)

Square capitals when finished with a square-tip pen, produced serifs that were wide and square. It was unnatural to make pointed serifs (as they appeared on inscriptions) with this kind of pen point.

SETMA
CRESCERE IAM DO
INGENTI STOLLEN
VERBERA LENTAPA
SED NON VELAMMA
QUAM VENIRE ME
SIVE BOVM SIVE ES