

**KLEMENTINA MOZINA**

# ROMAN CAPITALS

by *Silvano Fassina*

## FIVE ITINERARIES IN ROME

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La targa alla base  
della Colonna Traiana:  
quasi impossibile vedere  
oggi queste lettere (salvo  
aperture improvise),  
che sono il modello  
più famoso di lettere  
imperiali.

ples of Renaissance Sistine epigraphs. In the pavement in front of the main altar is a disk in red marble with a white inscription and Arabic numbers, another example of epigraphic classicism in the early seventeenth century. In the mosaic of the apse is a gilded inscription of Pasquale I (817-824).

The Aventine – on the opposite bank of the Tiber at this level – is the hill where several of the main paleo-Christian basilicas are clustered. In particular **Santa Sabina** conserves inside, over the central door, a large mosaic band with a very beautiful inscription in gilded letters on a blue background, the only remaining piece of the primitive fifth century basilica. About thirteen and a half metres long and four metres high it was made to commemorate the presbyter Peter, founder of the Basilica at the time of Pope Celestine V (422-432). Some decades apart from the Christian character originally created by Filocal, monumental celebratory inscriptions tend to adhere fairly closely to imperial models. The irregularly drawn and spaced letters are 40 cm high and take up seven lines. Apart from the striking slant of the v, note the serifs even on the flattened top of the A and the strange variations in the crossbars of the T. Not far away in the scenic setting of **Piazza dei Cavalieri di Malta**, Giovan Battista Piranesi includes a large memorial stone honouring Clement XIII Rezzonico in the walled square he designed in 1765.

#### Fifth itinerary Roman Forum and Appian Way

The tablet on the base of **Trajan's Column** is almost unanimously acclaimed as the greatest epigraphy

masterpiece of all time. The characters, carved some nineteen centuries ago (between 112 and 113 AC) are still a supreme example – unsurpassed for some – of accurate design and legibility, carefully spaced and perfectly cut. The Trajan letters come from rich imperial epigraphic experience and have been the ideal model for Roman capitals from the sixteenth century up to the present.

After Cresci, Jan Tschichold and Eric Gill have put forward hypotheses of reconstruction based on reliefs and yet differing between them. James Mosley has studied their evolution and finally Father Edward M. Catich has published various analyses culminating in 1968 with a massive work (almost a police investigation), concluding with the assertion – definitive in his view – that the imperial inscriptions were first painted in all details with a flat brush, at a slant of about thirty degrees, then carved and painted red; the inscription is therefore preceded and conditioned by the stroke of the brush; in this sense the serifs cannot be justified as unavoidable retouching of the carving of the triangular furrow but are a conscious graphic choice, and above all the cliché can be retraced whereby all Roman capitals must always be constructed geometrically.

The text reads: 'The Senate and the Roman people to the Emperor Caesar Divo Nerva, son of Nerva, Trajan, Augustus, Germanicus, Dacicus, Pontifex, Maximus, seventeen times tribune, six times emperor, six times consul, father of the homeland, to show how high was the hill that with such fatigue has been excavated'. The hill was the 'saddle' between Quirinal and Capitol; the Column, almost 40 metres high including the base (the column itself is 100 Roman feet high) was built to celebrate

Trajan's victory over the Dacians in 107 AC. The inscription is not on general view: one can go directly to the entrance to Trajan's markets, on Via Quattro Novembre (the visit to the markets does not include the Column, so hope to find an amenable custodian), or telephone the relevant service on 67231. During Spring 1994 on Sundays when Via dei Fori Imperiali was closed to traffic, the town council organized exceptional opening hours for Trajan's Forum, but we do not know whether this enterprise will be repeated.

On the grass, to the left of the Altare della Patria are the remains of the tomb of C. Publius Bibulus, *adilis plebis e tribunus plebis* in 209 BC; the characters of the inscription – which seem to be more of a century later – are some of the few examples remaining of monumental epigraphy from the Republican era. On Via dei Fori Imperiali, behind the gardens, a fine view can be had of the Roman Forum, from the Curia side, with an excellent and free observation deck for the arch of Septimius Severus. The nearby church is dedicated to saints Luke and Martina; on the façade a baroque inscription (Urban VIII Barberini) takes up the classical tone, more suited to the context of the Forum. Before going into the Roman Forum we pass Largo Corrado Ricci where, on the side of the Tor de' Conti looking on to the street that bears its name, a third century tablet in gothic capitals can be seen.

Going into the **Roman Forum** from the entrance on Via dei Fori Imperiali, after the ramp, on the right is a monumental inscription to Augustus' nephew, Lucius Caesar, the 'prince of youth', from an arch of 2 BC and another imperial monumental fragment of the first century (*IMP AUG TRIB PLEBS*). Further on, in