

## VIII.—THE LETTERING OF ROMAN-BRITISH INSCRIBED STONES.

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[Read on 26th May, 1948.]

This study is confined to the lettering of a limited number of monumental Roman inscribed stones found in Britain, particularly military inscriptions used in the neighbourhood of Hadrian's Wall. Its chief aim is to show the character of lettering which was used by the Romans for official military inscriptions. The standard achieved by the Romans in the art of letter cutting was extremely high, and exhibits remarkable consistency throughout the first and second centuries, and in the early third century A.D. Some changes in superficial design were made from time to time, but the basic character of the lettering remained unchanged. This was due in no small part to the perfection of the skeleton forms of the Roman alphabet, which combined, paradoxically, the extremes of uniformity and variation.

The Roman alphabet is based upon two simple forms, found in the letters I and O. The letter I is the key to the straight parts, and the letter O is the key to all the round forms. By this simple derivation a considerable degree of uniformity is obtained, but the variations which these units permit, and which were adopted, are very wide. The letters of the Roman alphabet are most distinctive in form and it is of interest to recall the instances during the Renaissance and the present century when in search of letters of very legible character study has been focussed on Roman models.

But quite apart from these two simple forms being the basis of the structure of Roman letters, they provided, by the nature of their incision, a key to the way in which the entire alphabet was to be cut. This may be recognized as a principle from which the Romans never departed.

Some inscriptions, it is true, were made by cutting or punching nothing more than the skeleton forms of the letters. But most inscriptions, particularly imperial dedications and records of building, were elaborately cut with the strokes of the letters varying in thickness, and terminating in beautifully formed serifs. The thicknesses of the strokes were not arranged in a haphazard manner, but on the contrary followed a precise formula. They correspond mainly, and without exception in the Trajanic period, to the character of penmanship. Indeed, if the letters of the Roman alphabet were written out with a broad pen, with its edge held at an angle of fifteen degrees from the horizontal, a completely accurate record of the thicknesses of strokes as well as the character of the gradations of round letters of Trajanic inscriptions would be obtained.

Because of the technique of incision, however, any variation in the thickness of the strokes of letters implies a corresponding variation in the depth of the bed cut. The result of this is that the quality of light and shade on the opposing sides of the incision is also subject to variation. Thus the factors of thickness of stroke, depth of cut, and light and shade, are closely integrated in letter cutting, and at no time were they exploited to greater effect than during the first century and the first half of the second. Later on, as the result of more uniformity in the thickness of the strokes of letters, the bed cut remained almost at a fixed depth, thus limiting greatly the elegance of design which is proper to incised lettering.

During the first century and first half of the second, when the technique of letter cutting reached its culmination, the manner in which inscriptions were set out and spaced was appropriate to their position and importance. The

text was arranged usually in one of two ways. Either it was set out symmetrically in relation to the vertical axis of the panel, as in the Trajanic inscription at Caerleon,<sup>1</sup> or was massed over the whole area of the stone, as in the Hadrianic inscription from Wroxeter.<sup>2</sup> In the third century, when letters were less pure in form, and ligatures freely used, licence was taken with arrangement and layout. It became quite common at this time to arrange an inscription as a compositor of to-day arranges a printed paragraph, with the last line ending at will, as in the inscription at South Shields, fig. 7.

In arranging their inscriptions there can be little doubt that the Romans were aiming principally at good pattern. This may be true of the work of all periods. If there was any motive to be coupled with the aim of attaining good pattern, then it seems to have been none other than that of movement or rhythm. Study of the subtleties embodied in the design of their letters points to the belief that the Romans were conscious of certain features, which, if not modified, would draw the eye to either a static or incongruous passage in an inscription. Such features as the asymmetrical placing of the strokes of certain letters so as to prevent them from appearing rigid, or the slight convexity of certain normally straight strokes so as to prevent acuteness, seem calculated to ensure continuity of movement. If there is any substance in this view then the simple objective of merely spacing letters evenly, as it is generally understood to-day, would not have been the aim of the Roman craftsman. His aim would have been to create an even pattern or consistent rhythm over the lines of lettering, and in some cases over the entire surface of an inscription. He would have been essentially a creator of good pattern, adjusting the position of the letters according to their character and weight, and composing words of great beauty and unity. That is probably true.

<sup>1</sup> Illustrated in *Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. xviii, 1928, fig. 71.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. xiv, 1924, plate xxvii.



FIG. I.

The view that rhythm and the attainment of good pattern were uppermost in the mind of the Roman craftsman is further supported by two important points. First, spaces between words or their abbreviations are not usual. The words, punctuated by triangular points or conventional leaves, flow on without interruption. Secondly, every Roman inscription of note possesses its own distinctive

kind of pattern, peculiar to the period in which it was cut.

This latter point is applicable to many inscriptions of which the lettering may be said to be of non-monumental character. An excellent example of this type is provided by a stone in the Blackgate Museum at Newcastle upon Tyne, inscribed in honour of *Virgo Caelestis*.<sup>3</sup> The pattern of the lettering of this inscription is extremely flowing and cursive in quality, being specifically based upon rustic capitals.

From time to time modifications were made in the form of some letters in order that they should more readily conform to the character of pattern to be adopted throughout an inscription. But, as will be seen from the examples of the letter T on page 166, the modifications could become a permanent change. The change made in the form of this letter after the Trajanic period was invariably followed, in spite of instances, such as in the dedication to *Sol Invictis* at Corbridge, fig. 5, where space would have allowed a return to its former and wider proportion.

From these introductory notes it will be gathered that the finest examples of Roman lettering belong to the first century and first half of the second, and that the purest forms are to be found in work of the Trajanic period. Fig. 1 consists of letters from the inscription at the base of the Trajan Column in Rome, perhaps the most outstanding example extant, which will serve in the following pages as a model for comparison. It will be observed that the letters of the Trajanic inscription at Caerleon are in many instances identical with those of fig. 1, and therefore have been chosen as one of the five examples which are set out in the illustrations on pages 160 to 166.

It should not be thought, however, that inscriptions of the Trajanic period represent the first Roman lettering of artistic significance which is known to exist in Britain.

<sup>3</sup> Stone no. 55, *Roman Inscriptions and Sculptures belonging to the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne*, Catalogue by R. G. Collingwood, 1926.

The lettering of the sepulchral inscription of Julius Classicianus<sup>4</sup> is of outstanding interest, and not only compares well with Trajanic work, but appears to possess many of its features. The letters, which are of good proportion, are boldly cut and are extremely well arranged.

<sup>4</sup> The inscription, as it exists to-day, is on two blocks of stone. The portion containing the first part of the text was found in 1852, while the other was exposed by the London Passenger Transport Board in 1935, at Trinity Place, Trinity Square, London, E.C. *Vide* F. Cottrill, *Antiquaries' Journal*, vol. xvi, 1936, p. 1, illus.

## COMPARATIVE CHART.

An annotated chart of letters from five inscriptions dating from A.D. 100 to A.D. 222 is given on pages 160 to 166. The five examples of each letter set side by side reading from the left are from the following stones :

1. An inscription of Trajan, of A.D. 99-100, from the legionary fortress at Caerleon, Monmouthshire.<sup>5</sup>
2. An inscription commemorating work for Hadrian and Platorius Nepos, of A.D. 122-126, from the fort at Benwell, on Hadrian's Wall.<sup>6</sup>
3. An inscription in honour of Hadrian, A.D. 129-130, from the *forum* at Wroxeter, Salop.<sup>7</sup>
4. A dedication to *Sol Invictus*, of about A.D. 162, from the supply-base at Corbridge, Northumberland.<sup>8</sup>
5. An inscription in honour of Severus Alexander, of A.D. 222, from the fort at South Shields.

<sup>5</sup> *Catalogue of the Roman Inscribed and Sculptured Stones found at Caerleon, Monmouthshire*, National Museum of Wales and Press Board of the University of Wales, 1935; *Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. xviii, 1928, fig. 71.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. xxviii, 1938; *Arch. Aeliana*, 4th ser., vol. xix, p. 19, plate iv.

<sup>7</sup> *The Report on Excavations at Wroxeter, 1923-1927*. Birmingham Arch. Society, University Press, Oxford, 1942; *Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. xiv, 1924, plate xxvii.

<sup>8</sup> *Arch. Aeliana*, 4th ser., vol. xxi, p. 210, plate xb 1.

## LETTER A.



In each of the examples, with the exception of no. 5, the oblique strokes are asymmetrical, the first stroke being the more upright. What comparative difference there is in the angles of these strokes is sufficient to prevent the letters from appearing rigid, and is used regardless of their splay. The splay of no. 1 may be regarded as perfect when the factors underlying the composition of letters into words are considered.

It will be noticed that the apices of nos. 1 and 3 have no serifs. In the Trajanic and Hadrianic periods of which these letters are specimens the letter A seldom bore serifs at its apex. This also applies to the letters M and N. In later periods it was customary for the apices of all three letters to be decorated with serifs, and the reason for this is probably to be found in the extensive use of ligatures. If, for instance, a ligature is made of the letters A and V the apex of the A would automatically assume the serifs on the first stroke of the letter V. It is significant that where the influence of the ligature form is presumed, serifs occur on both sides of the apex and not on one side only, as is the case in no. 2 and in the letters M and N of no. 1.

## LETTER B.



The part of the Caerleon inscription which would have contained a letter B is missing, but, judging by the char-



acter of the existing part, this letter would have been very similar to the B from the inscription at the base of the Trajan Column in Rome (fig. 1). In that example the intersection of the two loops is made most carefully, the lower one being dominant both in scale and form. The upper loop links lightly to the lower a considerable distance from the upright stroke. The orbit of both loops is straightened somewhat, so that their junction is made nearly at right angles. This feature of straightening the orbit of a loop is peculiar to Trajanic lettering. (See the letter R, no. 1.) The four examples shown above demonstrate these characteristics breaking down progressively, until little of them is left in no. 5.

## LETTER C.



No. 1 embodies all the features most commonly found in this letter, namely, a strong almost circular form, with the thickness of the stroke set at an oblique angle and the upper arm and serif heavier than the lower counterpart. No. 3 differs from this pattern, inasmuch as the thickness of the stroke is set vertically in conformity with the arrangement of all the round letters and loops throughout the inscription. No. 4 follows closely the form made by a pen, the lower part being heavy, drawn out, and terminating in a point.

## LETTER D.



No. 1 is narrower than normal, but nevertheless possesses the grace of a typical Trajanic D. The form

resembles in many particulars the lower part of a B of the same period. In no. 3 the ends of the loop are thickened considerably at their junction with the upright stroke. Conformably, the same feature is to be found in the letters B, P, and R of the same inscription. This feature is seen in its most subtle form in no. 1.

## LETTER E.



No. 1 represents the best form and proportion. The manner in which the lower arm merges from the upright stroke resembles the corresponding part of the D.

The thickness of the arms in no. 3 is much greater than is usually found in an example of its date. The upper arm embodies the unusual feature of a serif pointing upwards, which appears to intensify the vigour of the letter.

No. 5, like many examples of the third century, is narrow in proportion.

## LETTER G.



The difference of design in the five examples illustrated shows the kind of progression in its form which the letter G was to undergo at the hands of scribes in the seventh and eighth centuries, developing into the minuscule of the tenth century.

There can be little doubt that shortening the tail of no. 4 made it necessary to add the long serif in the form of a spur in order to avoid confusion between this letter and C. This spur anticipates the form seen in no. 5.

## LETTER M.

The best form and proportion are found in no. 1. In this example and no. 2 the second and third strokes are deliberately curved, either to obtain better poise, or to neutralize the effect of acuteness which results from such strokes being straight, as in no. 3.<sup>9</sup>

In nos. 1 and 2 the lower serifs are beautifully formed, the outer ones being large and well branched from the stroke, while the inner ones are extremely small. The poise of these letters is undoubtedly enhanced by this feature.

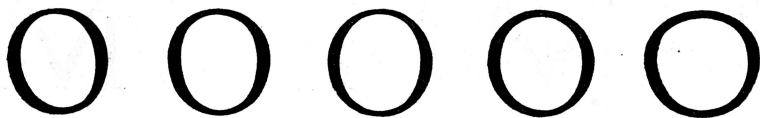
In no. 5 the first and fourth strokes are vertical, a form which may be due to the use of ligatures.

## LETTER N.

The side strokes of no. 1 are rather heavy, but this is not unusual in letters N of the Trajanic period. The oblique strokes of nos. 1 and 2 are curved in the same manner as the inner strokes of the letters M of the same inscriptions. This feature is again lacking in no. 3, but it is to be seen in no. 5 in an exaggerated form.

<sup>9</sup> The use of the device of curving the downward converging strokes of the letter M, and those of the letters N and V, was first noted by the writer in an appreciation of the inscription at the base of the Trajan Column in Rome, c. A.D. 114, in *Roman Lettering*, Pitman, 1938. Where this device appears in early inscriptions it is carefully calculated to do no more than neutralize the unpleasant effect of acuteness which would be seen if the particular strokes of these letters were straight. Where it appears in later inscriptions the result is much less subtle.

## LETTER O.



No. 1, a faithful copy from the Caerleon inscription, is not so well formed as most examples of the period. It conforms, nevertheless, to the Trajanic type in being slightly less than a true circle in width, the outside orbit being set perpendicularly, and the inside orbit set obliquely, thus producing the characteristic tilt.

No. 5, typical of its period, is wider than a true circle.

## LETTER P.



The best and most typical form is found in no. 1. By comparison the loop of no. 3 is wide and shallow, and in no. 5 it has lost a great deal of its true character.

Development of serifs is well illustrated by the five examples. In no. 1 they branch carefully from the stroke and are longer in vertical dimension. In no. 2 they are similar. In no. 3 they are small but branch carefully from the stroke and are drawn out into a thin line. In no. 4 they branch from the stroke abruptly and are somewhat triangular in form. They are longer in the horizontal dimension than the vertical. In no. 5 they are irregular in form, but tend on the whole to be equal in horizontal and vertical dimensions.

## LETTER R.



The design of no. 1 is more integrated than that of the other examples. In typical Trajanic style, the loop is straightened slightly as it approaches the tail and then continues in a graceful arc to join the upright stroke. The tail is strong and flourished at the end in a manner which gives stability to the entire design.

No. 3 shows some degree of disunity in that it too closely resembles the letter P with a tail added.

## LETTER S.



The best form is to be found in no. 1, in the beautiful and unbroken character of the thick stroke to which the narrow arms are well related. In comparison the arms of no. 3 are not nearly so well related to the thick stroke of the letter.

The backward tilt of the letter S, which was common in the third century and which can be seen in a marked degree in no. 5, was already evident in a mild form in the latter half of the second century, as illustrated in no. 4.

## LETTER T.



The Trajanic form in no. 1 represents the true proportion of the letter as a specimen. This form, perfect as it is in itself, could survive only so long as letters were liberally spaced. But when letters were more tightly packed or ligatures used the arms of this letter were shortened. Even in so important an inscription as that from Wroxeter (no. 3), the letter-cutter has shortened the arms of the T because of the close spacing of the letters.

## LETTER V.



No. 1 represents the normal proportion of the letter, and like nos. 2 and 5 embodies a curve in the lower part of each stroke. This feature is not included in nos. 3 and 4, consequently in these examples the junction of the strokes is more acute.

## LETTER X.



Nos. 1 and 2 are not symmetrical, and though the difference in the angles of the strokes is only about two degrees it is sufficient to prevent the letter from appearing rigid.

No. 4 is exceptionally wide, and tends to stand apart from the other letters in the same inscription (fig. 5).

ANNOTATED ILLUSTRATIONS FROM INSCRIPTIONS.

IMP

CES

FIG. 2.

TRN

HD<sup>4</sup>

FIG. 3.

AVG  
 VEXL  
 TOB

FIG. 4.

Figs. 2, 3, and 4 consist of letters from the Hadrianic inscription of A.D. 122-126, found at the Roman fort at Benwell.<sup>10</sup> The letters are deeply cut with a somewhat angular section. This was used in all probability to make the inscription read clearly in the shaded position of the portico to which it belonged.

Several groups of letters in the illustrations, such as the IMP, are drawn as they appear in the inscription. The letters of the first two lines are  $4\frac{1}{4}$  in. high, and those of the last two lines  $2\frac{1}{2}$  in.

<sup>10</sup> F. G. Simpson and I. A. Richmond, *The Roman Fort of Hadrian's Wall at Benwell*, *Arch. Aeliana*, 4th ser., vol. XIX, p. 19, plate IV.



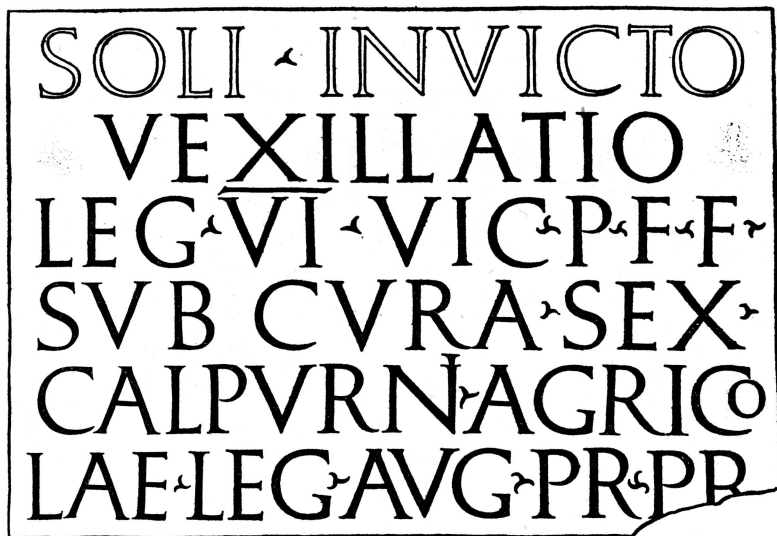


FIG. 5.

Fig. 5 is drawn from the inscription of dedication to *Sol Invictus*, of about A.D. 162, found at Corbridge.<sup>11</sup> The slab, which measures within the moulding  $40\frac{1}{4}$  in. long and  $27\frac{3}{4}$  in. high, is flanked by *peltae*, once supported by flying Victories. The first line, drawn here in outline, was erased in A.D. 193.<sup>12</sup> The inscription is well arranged on the basis of a vertical spine. There is very little decrease in the heights of the lines of lettering, the upper lines being  $3\frac{5}{8}$  in. and the lower  $3\frac{1}{2}$  in.

An excellent pattern is maintained over the entire area of the inscription, made possible by the carefully adjusted spaces between lettering and moulding.

<sup>11</sup> I. A. Richmond, *Roman Legionaries at Corbridge, their Supply-Base, Temples and Religious Cults*, *Arch. Aeliana*, 4th ser., vol. XXI, p. 210, plate xb 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212.

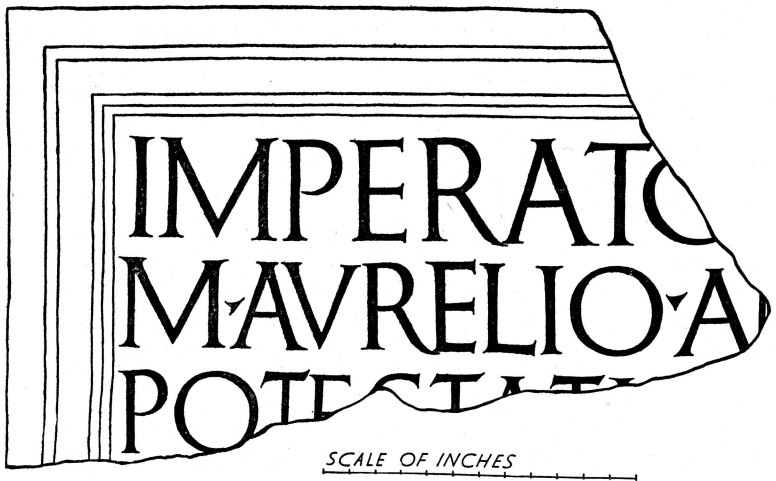


FIG. 6.

Fig. 6 is drawn from a fragmentary inscription in honour of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, this being a part found built into the Pele Tower at Corbridge.<sup>13</sup> The parts have been assembled in their respective positions in a reconstruction by Mr. William Bulmer, exhibited at the Museum at Corstopitum.

The inscription can be dated between the autumn of A.D. 163 and December 164.<sup>14</sup>

Judging by the character of the available fragments the inscription appears to have been composed more freely than usual for work of such importance. There is noticeable emphasis on certain syllables.

Like fig. 5, a consistent pattern is maintained up to the beginning of the moulding.

<sup>13</sup> William Bulmer, *A Fragmentary Inscription of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus from Corbridge*, *Arch. Aeliana*, 4th ser., vol. XXI, p. 239.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 245.

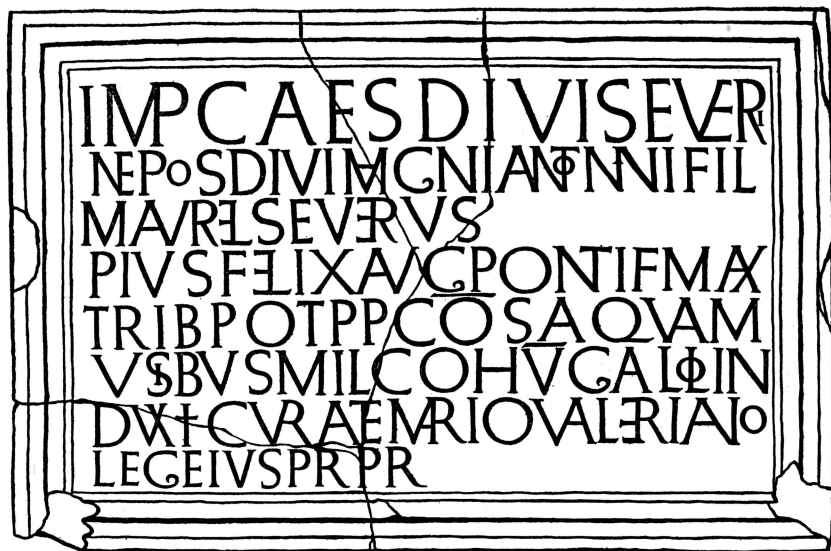


FIG. 7.

Fig. 7 is drawn from the South Shields stone, A.D. 222, found at the Roman fort on the Lawe, at South Shields, and now at the Public Library and Museum, South Shields.

The inscription, which measures within the moulding 48 in. long and 29 $\frac{5}{8}$  in. high, contains ligatures of the most varied type. They do not detract, however, from the character of pattern or rhythm of the composition.

The erasure at the end of the third line, denoted by a blank space in the drawing, is of the name ALEXANDER.