

BOOK REVIEW

The Eternal Letter: Two Millennia of the Classical Roman Capital. Edited by PAUL SHAW. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015. Pp. xii + 258. Hardcover, \$55.95. ISBN978-0-262-02901-8.

Only a small fraction of classicists have had the good fortune to attend an institution that possesses a rubbing of the inscription from Trajan's Column made by Father Edward Catich (1906–1979). For this minority, the full-scale renderings often provided a formative first encounter with *capitalis monumentalis*. Once emancipated from the flat pages of textbooks and distorted photocopies, the Roman square capitals emerged in the rubbings as expressive yet subtle typographic specimens. Catich's expert deployment of powdered graphite not only called attention to the gestural quality, proportions and spacing of the letters, but also the architectonic nature of the inscription as a whole.

Latin epigraphists know Father Edward Catich for his groundbreaking studies into the creation of Roman letterforms in lapidary inscriptions. An early apprenticeship in signwriting gave him a unique advantage in understanding the shape and form of majuscules. His main—and at the time, radical—premise was that the letters, and in particular the serifs, were in the first instance not created by a stonecutter's tools, such as a chisel, but rather a flexible brush. He lectured widely and published his theories in two key volumes, *Letters Redrawn from the Trajan Inscription in Rome* (1961) and *The Origin of the Serif: Brush Writing & Roman Letters* (1968). For classicists, the story of Father Catich typically ends here, but for typographers, he remains the inspirational protagonist of an enduring fascination with the Roman capital. Fittingly, this volume under review pays homage to him at several points.

Despite what might be inferred from the title, *The Eternal Letter* is neither a history of Roman letterforms nor a volume that deals with Latin epigraphy. Its editor, Paul Shaw, is a graphic designer and historian who focuses on architectural lettering. This context alone provides an insight into the overarching perspective of the book, but Shaw also clarifies the thematic approach in his introduction. In essence, this is an assemblage of thirty diverse chapters that examine the reception and influence of the classical Roman capital within two distinct periods of typographical preeminence: the Renaissance and the twentieth century (vii). It is

worthwhile noting that this volume is not envisioned as a stand-alone project but rather the first in a series of books entitled *Codex Studies in Letterforms*. *Codex* was a short-lived (2011–2012) but highly regarded typography journal for which Shaw also served as an editor.

The dedicatory inscription from Trajan's Column remains a touchstone for the material discussed in this book, but the contributions cover substantial ground, both in terms of subject and chronology. The overriding topic is the development and systematic analysis of the Roman majuscule as a letterform. Included here are historical accounts of the reuse and adaptation of ancient lapidary inscriptions in Renaissance and Baroque Italy; studies of the geometry and proportions of Roman letters; critiques of contemporary Roman typefaces, including Cyrillic and Greek versions; and the reception of the Roman capital in popular culture. In addition to the essays there is an extensive timeline that charts the existence of the Roman capital over more than two millennia (13–18); a 'census' of known reproductions of the inscription from Trajan's Column (238–241); a list of museum collections of Roman inscriptions (242–244); and an overview of how to record inscriptions using different methods (251–255). Rather than providing a comprehensive bibliography, there is a suggested reading list that is organized thematically and chronologically (245–249).

Notably, many of the essays are written by or about design practitioners and craftsmen—typographers, calligraphers and lettercarvers—and they offer perspectives on Roman letterforms that are seldom on the radar of classicists. For instance, Richard Kinderlsey provides an interview with two generations of lettercarvers, John E. Benson and Nicholas Benson, which enthusiastically debates the graphic legibility of Roman inscriptions (143–164). Likewise, while the inspiration for a modern typeface like Adobe Trajan, which was released in 1989, may seem patently evident, few working outside of graphic design will understand the challenges involved in translating monumental, epigraphic letterforms into a digital typeface for wide distribution. In an essay recounting the development of Adobe Trajan, Scott-Martin Kosofsky describes how the designer, Carol Twombly, used rubbings from Trajan's Column (including some by Catich) as a precedent and then created a unique typeface by fusing formal typographic practice with the newly available PostScript technology (181–183).

Particularly illuminating in this volume are the instances that disclose the classical Roman capital as the genesis for typefaces that many assume to be strictly of the twentieth century. Two such cases are mentioned in Ewan Clayton's essay on the polymath Eric Gill: the eponymous Gill Sans (1928) as well as its antecedent,

the iconic London Underground (1916) by Edward Johnson (85–103). Another interesting example is that of Optima, a now ubiquitous sans-serif typeface that was designed by Herman Zapf in 1958. Shaw, in a study of Zapf, notes that while Optima is rooted in ancient Roman letterforms, it is most closely related to epigraphic conventions that took hold in Renaissance Florence (111–125).

Modern classicists have long acknowledged their indebtedness to Renaissance scholars for the survival not only of ancient inscriptions but also the discipline of epigraphy itself. Less recognized is the extent to which these same early modern scholars also made typographic innovations that fueled a wholesale revival of the Roman majuscule. Two essays in this book address such a situation in Baroque Rome: James Mosley tells the story of Giovanni Francesco Cresci and Luca Horfei, calligraphers in the Vatican who heavily influenced and in many cases designed new inscriptions for re-erected and re-dedicated ancient monuments; both used the Trajan inscription as a model (59–63). Garrett Boge, a type designer himself, describes in his contribution how the letterforms of Cresci and Horfei provided the direct inspiration for series of typefaces he created in the 1990s named The Baroque Set (64–65).

Overall, this is a first-rate book that is sumptuously illustrated and a pleasure to read. Its designer, Linda Florio, has done an exceptional job of unifying such a diverse set of voices and images. Both students and teachers in classical reception studies will certainly welcome the volume. However, since there are few discussions of the inscribed texts themselves, this book unlikely to find its way onto reading lists for courses in Latin literature and epigraphy. This is a pity, for the book not only provides a glimpse into the subtle technicalities of Roman majuscules; it also offers a fine opportunity for classicists to consider how letterform design influences the reading and interpretation of inscriptions.

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