



Early Evolution of Roman Letters

By Allan Haley

ROMAN CAPITAL LETTERS ARE MONUMENTAL IN TWO SENSES. They were frequently inscribed on monuments. And, they are large and formal, bestowing importance on words and dates cut into the stone. Roman capitals are elegant, commanding attention and respect. This “typographic attitude” was suitable for graphic communication intended to last for millennia; it was less appropriate for everyday communication that included business records, technical documentation, literature, social correspondence, and even shopping lists.

Easier Writing Styles

Stonecutters carved the inscriptions on monuments using metal tools, after having drawn the letters on the stone with a writing utensil. Scribes were specialists who wrote by hand all manner of documents on papyrus or other, less durable writing surfaces, to produce ephemeral graphic communication. Their handwriting tools gave them more freedom and flexibility than cutting in stone, and new suites of letterforms began to emerge. Today, scholars are still uncertain whether the scribes gradually adapted inscriptional capitals to their needs or whether they created completely new writing styles based on practical considerations. Over time, three distinct styles of handwriting – or hands as they are called – emerged to replace formal capitals in everyday graphic communication. These styles came to be known as square capitals, rustic capitals and Roman cursive.

Square Capitals

Square capitals are generally considered by typographic historians as attempts to approximate inscriptional letters. This writing style was used almost exclusively

to produce the most formal books and documents. These letters definitely embody gravitas: the precision and regularity of their form shows that they were drawn slowly and carefully. Nonetheless, they were written more

quickly, with a more flowing hand, than was possible in stone. As a result, square capitals, although they were patterned after the capital letterforms, differed from the inscriptional form of letters on monuments.



Example of Square Capitals (upper), Rustic Capitals (middle), Roman Cursive (lower).

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Rustic Capitals

Square capitals were wide, taking up a lot of space on a page or scroll. Patrons who used scribes realized that they could appropriately reduce the cost of producing certain, less important books and documents if the writing were done in a letterform that was narrower (thus saving space) and simpler to draw (thus saving time). The ultimate result was what has come to be known as rustic (or "simple") capitals.

Roman Cursive

The word cursive means "running" in Latin, and the Roman cursive form enabled the writer to keep the pen running along the writing surface.

This was ideal for recording business transactions, bookkeeping, correspondence and similar uses. Roman cursive was the ordinary business and correspondence hand of the Romans until approximately AD 500.

Since the writings were not usually intended to be permanent, the letters were often scratched in tablets of wax, clay or masonry, or written on papyrus. Sometimes they were so carelessly recorded that the result illegible to anyone other than the writer. Still, the very speed and casual manner in which these letters were written led to the present forms of many of our lower-case letters.

An important aspect of the Roman cursive hand was that evolved into the creation of ascending and descending parts on some of the letters. This probably came about because it is easier to make longer stems when writing quickly, than to draw the precise short ones used in more slowly written formal documents. Although the scribes were unaware of it at the time, the ascenders and descenders they incorporated into this more casual writing style helped create a major differentiator from capital letterforms. ■