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Romanesque capitals in inscriptions

This essay presents an overview of Romanesque capitals in inscriptions. They are first placed in the scene of the Romanesque period, then discussed in respect of their characteristics, both as individual letterforms and as part of inscriptions. Their origins are considered, as are relationships between manuscript and inscriptional uses. Explanations for the positioning and distribution of capitals in inscriptions are also proposed. An album provides additional examples of inscriptions from the period. The essay concludes with a brief review of revivals of Romanesque capitals that have appeared in subsequent centuries, up to the present day.

Romanesque capitals in inscriptions are a mix of three kinds of letters: the descendants of the Roman imperial square capital (*capitalis quadrata*), uncials, and angular versions of round letters, known as insular. The three were harmonised in some details, such as stroke width, in order that they work together. Romanesque capitals otherwise feature uncials and insular letters that are continuously and arbitrarily interchanged, and letters of all three kinds that are variously ligatured, intertwined, nested, or reversed. Letter widths and the spaces between them also vary, again often arbitrarily, though sometimes to fill a given space. Capitals that can be described as Romanesque first appear in inscriptions shortly before AD 1000, and for the next 200 or so years they were carved in stone, painted on walls, chased in metal, and executed in various other ways. They are found in many parts of Europe, from Sicily to Norway, from the British Isles to eastern Europe, and indeed as far east as Novgorod, Constantinople, and Jerusalem; (figure 1, overleaf).[1]

In the literature of letterform history, the Roman imperial square capital has received generous attention; so, too, have its renaissance revivals. Gothic capitals from the intervening period are also relatively well-known, as are early renaissance capitals such as those found in Florence.[2] Romanesque capitals, which served as models for early renaissance capitals, have by contrast received comparatively little attention. Some commentators have assumed that the forms of Romanesque capitals were not fixed but instead represented only the gradual change from Carolingian to Gothic,[3] or that they were experiments leading to the Gothic capital but little more.[4] But when a relatively large group of examples is assembled, it becomes clear that common characteristics can be identified that determine the appearance of Romanesque capitals. These characteristics, combined with an extraordinary variety of individual letterforms used in surprising and idiosyncratic ways, give Romanesque capitals their particular significance in the history of letterforms.

In the pages that follow, the principal sources and features of Romanesque capitals are introduced.

1. Romanesque capitals spread beyond Constantinople to Jerusalem and the Holy Land in the wake of the crusaders, carried there on objects such as the seals of Godfrey of Bouillon and the Knights Templar. See Prawer (1970), vol. 1, pp. 203, 243, 478, 482, 492; also Rozenberg (1999) for illustrations of funeral monuments (p. 295) and a tomb fragment (cover), all with Romanesque capitals.

2. Bibliographies compiling representative studies of the Roman imperial square capital and its revival can be found in *Typography papers*, 6 (2005), London: Hyphen Press, *passim*; Stiff (2005) discusses Florentine capitals in detail.

3. Koch (2007), p. 149.

4. Gray (1986), pp. 88, 107.

Figure 1. Romanesque capitals.

(a) Detail of the tomb of Gundrada, wife of William of Warenne, comrade-in-arms of William the Conqueror, St. John's church, Lewes, England, *c*. 1145. The letter N with a curved diagonal, a treatment that was rare in continental Europe, suggests that this tomb slab was made locally. Other letters are typically Romanesque, including A with a flat top, spiralling G, and R with a double-curved leg.

(b) Detail of bronze doors, Bonanno Pisano, Monreale cathedral, Sicily, 1186. The text runs: D(OMI)N(U)S PLASMAVI(T) ADA(M) DE LIMO TERE (the Lord formed Adam out of clay and earth). Typical Romanesque letters include A with a cross bar at its apex, composite DE, uncial M formed from an O-like shape with a large attached curl, minuscule N whose height matches the other capitals, and uncial U similar to the minusule N but flipped on a horizontal axis.

(c) Late Romanesque capitals from the Akaleptos Monastery church, Constantinople, painted after the fourth crusade (1202–4) but before 1250. Archaeological Museum, Istanbul. From a fresco depicting the life of St Francis of Assisi (d. 1226).

5. This demarcation is derived from Fernie (1996), p. 568; Timmers (1969) places its start around 950. Petzold (1995), p. 7, in agreement with other specialists, states that 'the term "Romanesque" is used to describe both the art and architecture of Western Europe from 1050 to 1200'. For the period 950 to 1050, the term 'First Romanesque' is often used; in Britain this period is called Saxon and the succeeding period, Norman; in Germany, art and architecture from immediately before 1050 is designated 'Ottonian'.

The Romanesque scene

The 'Romanesque' period ran from the middle of the tenth century to the end of the twelfth, without a clear beginning or end.[5] In the preceding centuries, Europe was beleaguered on all sides: in the south by the Saracens, in the north and west by the Vikings, and in the east by the Magyars. The Magyar threat was eventually lifted following their defeat by the army of Otto I at the battle of Lechfeld near Augsburg in 955. The Vikings were pacified by a treaty with the French king Charles the Simple in 911, and by their settlement in northwest France (though as Normans they remained occupiers in the south of Italy and on Sicily, and invaded England in 1066). The Saracen threat remained for considerably longer, and it was not until 1491 and the surrender of Granada that they were expelled entirely from western Europe.

A generally safer and more stable Europe in the second half of the tenth century led to increases in commerce and travel, and a revival of towns and cities. Although churches and convents had frequently been plundered by marauders, the western Christian church had

survived and now began to expand. Part of its expansion involved new construction activities that encompassed religious buildings and secular structures such as castles, bridges, and market halls.[6] This work was needed for several reasons: to repair damaged buildings, to provide more and bigger churches to service growing populations, and to satisfy cravings for prestige and power among the aristocracy and higher clergy. The period was also marked by growing numbers of pilgrims travelling long distances to commune with saints and relics housed in imposing shrines.

A consequence of much of this activity was a blossoming of Romanesque sculpture, to be found among other places on capitals and tympanums. Sculptures and architectural structures were frequently provided with inscriptional texts that sometimes include the names of their makers (figure 2, a–b). Letters and texts were also integrated into stained-glass windows, altars, fonts, reliquaries, pulpits, and other objects adorning buildings.

Characteristics

When studying the characteristics of Romanesque inscriptions it is instructive to draw a parallel with Romanesque buildings. Buildings from the period vary greatly. There seem to be more differences than similarities between St Mark's Basilica in Venice, for example, the cathedral at Pisa, and the Basilica of St Servatius in Maastricht (figure 3, a–c, overleaf). What many Romanesque buildings do have in common is that from the outside it is evident how their interiors

6. Le Goff (2006), p. 91.

Figure 2. Letter carvers.
(a) Signature of HARTMANNUS, inscription on a capital from the porch of the demolished collegiate church of St Simon and St Jude, Goslar, *c.* 1150. Notable is the double N comprised of a capital, followed by a minuscule N of the same height.
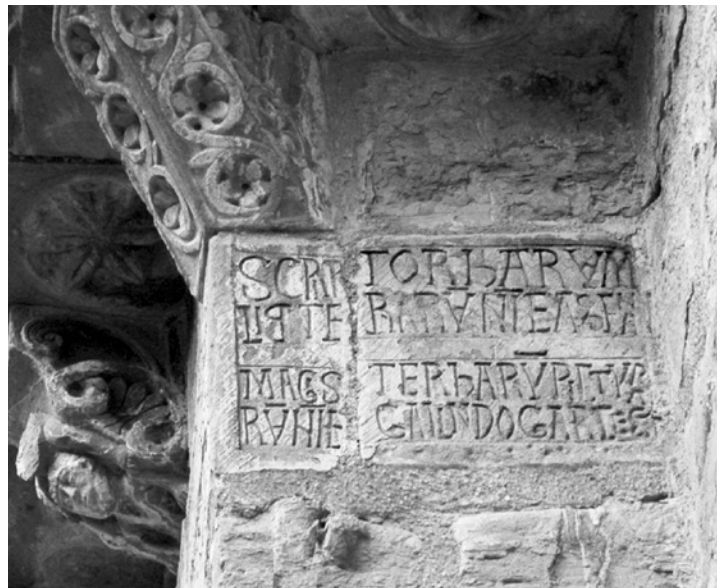
(b) Inscription, church of Santa Maria de Iguácel, north of Jaca (Spanish Pyrenees), *c.* 1094. The front of the church incorporates an inscription across its entire width. On a side wall, the letter carver Azenar has recorded his own name and the name of the man responsible for the paintings inside the church. The text runs: SCRITOR HARVM LITTERARV(M) N(OM)I(N)E AZENAR MAGISTER HARV(M) PICTVRARV(M) N(OM)I(N)E CALINDO GARCES (The name of the carver of these letters is Azenar, the name of the painter of these pictures is Calindo Garces). Notable is the use of upside-down A for V (see, for example, HARVM at top right).

Figure 3. Buildings of the Romanesque period.
(a) St Mark's Basilica, Venice.
(b) Pisa cathedral.
(c) Basilica of St Servatius, Maastricht.

7. Fernie (2010), p. 295.

are organised. Parts of the buildings such as towers, transepts, and apsides are clearly articulated and arranged in striking silhouettes.[7] But within and among these parts, a great variety of detail frequently occurs.

Many Romanesque inscriptions also display clearly defined elements whose individual treatments can be highly varied. One example, at the abbey of Moissac in southwestern France, demonstrates this well: a basic set of letterforms is arranged in a direct and unambiguous manner; thereafter, letter variants are distributed irregularly throughout the text (figure 4, a–b). In places several versions of a particular letter occur within a single word or line. The inscription is complex but not confused.
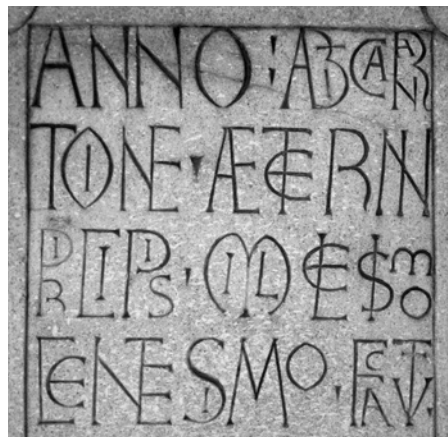

Figure 4. Inscription, cloister of the abbey at Moissac, France, 1100.
(a) The text gives the cloister's date of construction and the name of the abbot, Ansquetil, patron of the work. The text runs: ANNO AB I(N)CARNA / TIONE AETERNI / PRINCIPIS MILLESIMO / CENTESIMO FACTV(M) / EST CLAVSTRV(M) ISTVD / TEMPORE / DOMINI / ANSQVITILII / ABBATIS / AMEN / V V V / M D M / R R R / F F F.

    The sequence of letters V V V / M D M / R R R / F F F may represent: 'Vir Vitae Venerabilis / Moyssiacum Domum Melioravit / Restuit, Restauravit, Rexit / Fauste, Fortunate, Feliciter', i.e. (Ansquetil) Man of venerable life / Improved the house of Moissac / He built it, restored it, and ruled it / Fortunately, prosperously, fruitfully. (Forsyth, 2008, p. 178)
(b) Detail of figure 4a. Notable letterforms, in addition to the nested small capitals and merged and intertwined letters, include square C (in PRINCIPIS and CENTESIMO) and a rounded C, uncial E and square E in the same word (CENTESIMO), M with straight strokes (CENTESIMO) and in uncial form (MILLESIMO), N's of varying width, and O pointed at top and base.

Figure 5. Relief (one of four), Pieterskerk, Utrecht, probably made near Maastricht shortly after 1148. (Den Hartog, 1996, p. 137)

(a) The occurence of variant letterforms is illustrated by the three M's in MULIERUM MENS, the three T's in DEVOTA PUTAT, and the two U's in MULIERUM. The second, reversed, U is a form that is often found in the work of Romanesque letter carvers. Elsewhere the L in MULIERUM is noticeably wide and the N in MENS rather narrow.

(b) Detail of figure 5a.

(c) Detail of figure 5a.

Figure 6. Important characteristics of Romanesque capitals: slight differences between thick and thin parts; gradual transitions from thick to thin parts; straight parts that widen towards their end and have short triangular serifs.

A second example is a series of inscriptions cut into strong, square frames surrounding four panels in the Pieterskerk, Utrecht (figure 5, a–c). Here, numerous alternative letterforms can be seen, which occur irregularly among the words. The inscription shows another characteristic feature shared by most Romanesque capitals: relatively moderate differences between thick and thin parts. This can be seen in the gradual transition of arches and curves, whose thickest parts also tend to occur at their mid-points. Straight parts are shaped similarly, becoming gradually wider towards their ends and typically ending in a wedge shape whose points might equally be described as short, triangular serifs (figure 6).

A third example, a large inscription located on the west façade of the Pisa cathedral, effectively constitutes a catalogue of Romanesque letterforms (figure 7, overleaf). It contains a considerable range of capitals, many variants, and letterforms and spaces that widen and narrow, sometimes arbitrarily it seems, at other times to adjust to the available space.

Figure 7. Inscription, west facade of Pisa cathedral.

(a) The text of the inscription describes how in 1063 the inhabitants of Pisa fitted out a fleet that sailed to Palermo, at that time occupied by Saracens. There in the harbour the Pisans captured six ships containing treasure. After landing an army, they destroyed the town and surrounding countryside and killed thousands. The proceeds of the attack financed the construction of the cathedral. The text probably dates to 1118, the year the cathedral was consecrated by Pope Gelasius II.

(b) Detail. In this inscription, notable letters include round and angular versions of C, E, G, H, M, N, T and U, minuscule N whose height matches the other capitals, round and angular spiralling G, M with diagonals short of the baseline, O's pointed at top and bottom, R with an elegantly curved double leg, S slanting to the left without exception, and several variants of U. Among letter combinations, smaller capitals are nested inside larger ones, letters have been merged, and in some cases are noticeably narrower or wider, both individually and within a single line. Throughout the inscription, variations appear to be irregularly distributed.
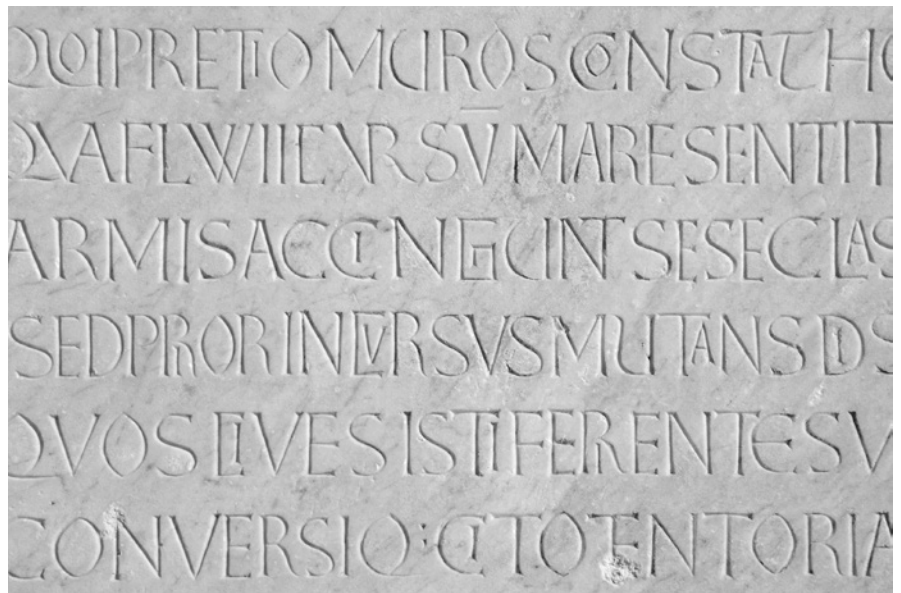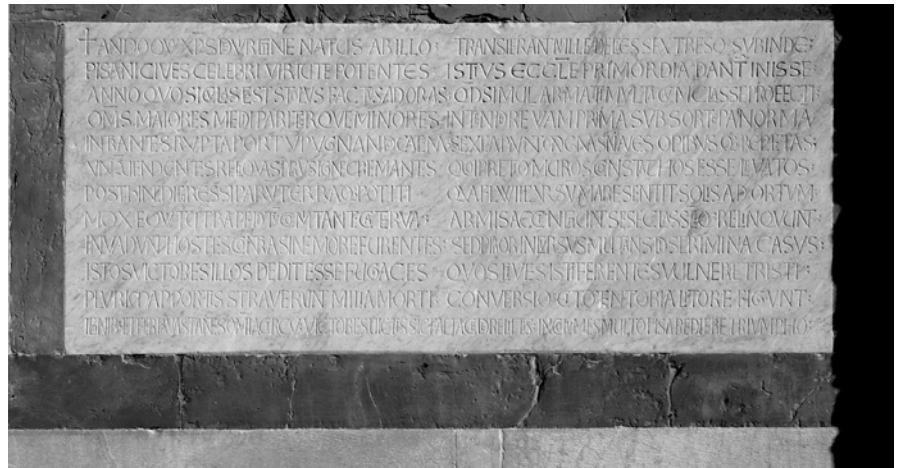
As mentioned, most Romanesque capitals found in inscriptions are the descendants of Roman imperial square capitals, including A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, L, M, N, O, P, Q, R, S, T, V, X, and Z; K occurs occasionally while W and Y are rare. Among Romanesque letterforms, widths often differ less than they do among their classical predecessors; individually, letters including E, F, L, P, and R are wider, and others including C, G, M, O, and Q are narrower. But all letters show some variation in width throughout the Romesque period.

Letters also have notable, often recurring, characteristics (figure 8). K, when found, typically has curved diagonals; the diagonals of M are usually short; the leg of R is almost always curved (either a single curve or a double); and S frequently leans to the left or is top-heavy. Round letters such as C, G and sometimes S also occur as angular forms, a treatment that extended to O and Q, which were pointed at their top and base. A, D, E, H, M, Q, T, and V occur as uncials and half-uncials (discussed below) and G is often given a spiralling form. All of these forms were additionally adapted to each other in proportion and weight and in their characteristic features and details.

Figure 8. Overview of Romanesque capitals, with alternatives (incomplete). An comprehensive overview of Romanesque capitals is difficult to compile because of the numerous alternatives and variations that exist. An overview may also be misleading since nowhere in Europe nor at any one time in the eleventh or twelfth century were all the letterforms used by or even known to an individual letter carver. While publications such as in 'Die Deutsche Inschriften' series can help to form a more complete picture, it is also the case that many inscriptions (and their particular letterforms) have been lost. Each letter carver probably used a selection of forms, which in all likelihood changed or were supplemented over time through contacts with colleagues and others. Letter carvers probably also passed on letterforms to younger colleagues or apprentices who added their own interpretations in turn.
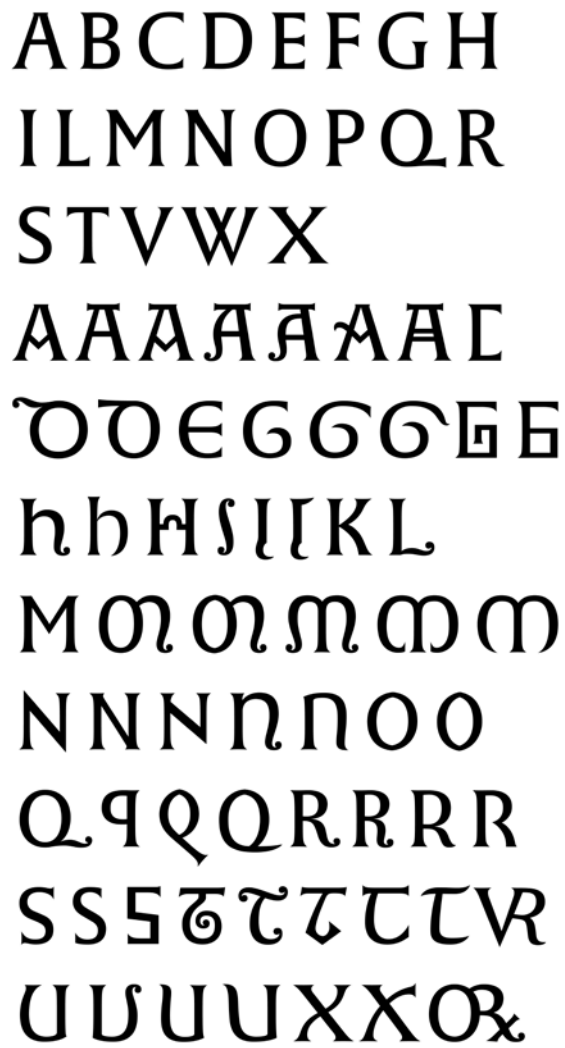
Origins

Although Romanesque capitals begin to appear as an identifiable ensemble in inscriptions sometime before 1000, many of the individual letterforms or their details are found earlier. A page from the Codex Aureus offers an example of antecedents. Made in Canterbury in the middle of the eighth century, it shows many characteristic letters found later in Romanesque inscriptions, notably uncials and angular versions of round letters (figure 9). A second example, the *Royal Bible*, made the following century probably also in Canterbury, shows uncials, angular forms of C and S, spiralling G, and other letterforms descendant from Roman square capitals (figure 10).

Angular versions of round letters belong to insular art, a mixture of mainly Irish-Celtic and Anglo-Saxon elements. Angular letters were influenced by the (Irish-Celtic) ogham and (Anglo-Saxon) runic alphabets; both contain linear and angular characters.[8] Greek letterforms may also have exerted some influence through trading and ecclesiastical contacts.[9] Uncials first appeared in the Mediterranean (probably North Africa) in the fourth century, created after the example of Greek uncials.[10] Uncials were brought to England in 597 by Augustine (of Canterbury), who was sent there from Rome by Pope

8. Gray (1986), p. 61.
9. Gray (1986), p. 49. The first page of the Gospel of St. Matthew in the Lindisfarne Gospels (f. 27ʳ) has Greek letters in the Latin text (Brown, 2011, p. 17).
10. Ullman (1997 [1932]), p. 68.

Figure 9. Page from the Codex Aureus, probably made in Canterbury, mid-eighth century. Royal Library, Stockholm. The vertical parts of letters widen toward their ends, horizontal parts are wedge-shaped, and there is little difference between thick and thin parts; the triangular serifs are very modest or almost non-existent. There are otherwise many notable letters. Some A's have horizontal bars at their apex and broken cross bars. Spiralling G appears and M's all have short diagonals. Every R has a double-curved leg. The majority of S's slant to the left, while the ends of some are spiralling; wide and narrow versions S alternate. There are angular C's and diamond-shaped O's. (O's in inscriptions, pointed at their top and base, were possibly derived from diamond-shaped versions, which rarely occur in inscriptions.) Forms resembling the small letters h and q are uncials or half-uncials and there is also a round uncial E. N employs a short diagonal in a low position while its right vertical stroke sometimes stops short of the baseline.

Figure 10. Capitals from the *Royal Bible*, 820–850. From Shaw (1853); original in The British Library.

Gregory I on a Christianizing mission.[11] In the seventh century a mix of uncials, insular letterforms, and derivations of Roman square capitals was taken to continental Europe, initially by Irish-Scottish monks who in the company of Columba founded monasteries such as Luxeuil and Bobbio. Anglo-Saxon missionaries including Boniface and Willibrord also took this mix to the continent where it was embraced by Gauls, Franks and other groups whose own artistic cultures used similar forms and patterns. Additionally, uncials were probably brought to northern Europe by clergy travelling across the Alps from Rome.

Having reached continental Europe, the use of uncials and angular versions of round letters was uneven. For example, after first appearing in Carolingian inscriptions in the ninth century (and especially the latter half [12]), angular C's and G's increase and become frequent in the eleventh century in combination with other angular letters such as S shaped like a reversed Z. But over the course of the twelfth century, angular versions in general lose ground and become rare.[13] Uncials, on the other hand, introduced into inscriptions more

11. Prior to uncials reaching England, half-uncials had already arrived in Ireland (Bischoff, 1993, p. 83) possibly as early as 431, brought there by Bishop Palladius (Brown, 2011, p. 47).

12. Koch (2007), p. 108; Debiais *et al* (2008), p. 113.

13. Debiais *et al* (2008), p. 119.

Figure 11. Gothic capitals, after the monument of Henry III, Westminster Abbey, *c.* 1272. From Shaw (1853).

14. Koch (2007), p. 108.

15. This letterform may originate in Ireland. Bischoff (1993), p. 85.

16. Morison (1972), p. 10.

17. Gray (1986), p. 23 and fig. 18.

slowly than angular letters,[14] were used throughout the Romanesque period, eventually evolving into Gothic capitals.

Among uncials and some half-uncials, including A, D, E, H, M, Q, T, and U, several shapes of each are found in Romanesque inscriptions, and minuscule N is made the height of other capitals.[15] During the second half of the twelfth century, Romanesque capitals increasingly follow the round uncial and half-uncial forms; their curves swell and their straight parts become heavier and wider at their ends. Letterforms follow a general trend from moderate to considerable differences between thick and thin parts combined with increasing ornamentation. The trend describes the gradual change of Romanesque into Gothic, where in addition capitals such as C, E, F (figure 11), and sometimes S are enclosed by vertical strokes on the right of the letter; others such as M are similarly enclosed by a horizontal stroke.

Some Romanesque letterforms occur considerably earlier than angular insular letterforms and uncials though their precise origins can be difficult to establish. A with a broken cross-bar, for example, can be found in the second half of the first century BC in Greek inscriptions (figure 12); they are later present in Roman mosaics. M with short diagonals is also Greek, occuring as early as 200 BC.[16] These letterforms were possibly transmitted into medieval inscriptions by way of the Romans, though it is equally possible that they were invented anew. Other notable early occurences include spiralling G in second-century Roman inscriptions and flat-topped A in Roman provincial inscriptions of the early fourth century (figure 13).[17] The origin of R with a double-curved leg is also unclear. An early version appears in the Codex Aureus (see figure 9) and it was often used after 800 in Carolingian manuscripts such as the 'Evangeliary of Lorsch'. Left-leaning S can be found much earlier in many early Christian inscriptions (figure 14).

Apart from the construction and details of particular letterforms, combinations of letters found in Romanesque inscriptions also have antecedents. Capital letters nested one inside another, for example,

Figure 12. Gravestone of Zosime, daughter of Herakleon, first century BC. Epigraphical Museum, Athens.

Figure 13. Votive tablet of Lucio Attio Macro al Genio of the seventh Roman legion, AD 127. Provincial Ethnographical Museum of León.
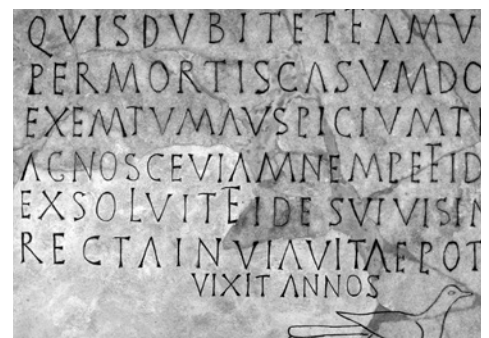

Figure 14. Inscription for Auspicius of Trier, detail, second half of the fifth century, Dom-und Diözesanmuseum, Trier. Notable letters include left-leaning S's, spiralling G's, and A's without a cross bar.
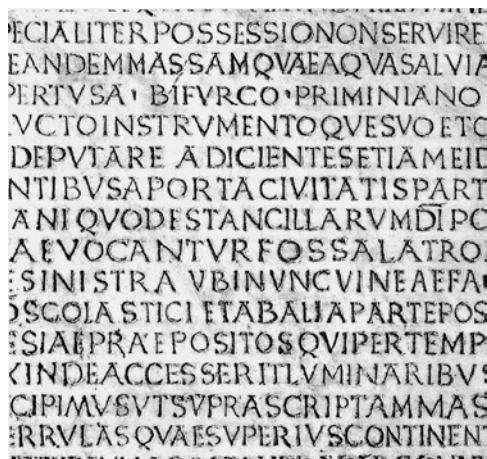
Figure 15. Part of a praeceptum by Pope Gregory the Great from 604, in the lapidary of St Paul Outside the Walls, Rome. Letterforms such as B and S, which are very wide, deviate considerably from Roman square capitals. Other notable features include M with diagonals that do not reach the baseline, and S that sometimes leans to the left.

Figure 18. Fragment of a Roman inscription, south exterior wall, Pisa cathedral, probably 2nd century AD; Banti (1996), p. 53.

were already used by the Romans as were letters that overlapped or whose (vertical) strokes coincided. But the Romans generally employed such combinations sparingly, at least in contrast to eleventh and twelfth century stone carvers who used them in abundance. Late Roman inscriptions do show features that seem to prefigure Romanesque inscriptions more directly (figure 15) and indeed are probably linked to them – and yet without displaying those variations of letterforms so typical of the Romanesque period. Rome was certainly visited frequently by clergy on ecclesiastical business and by many pilgrims. Memories of Roman inscriptions or sketches of them were quite possibly carried home, though this is conjectural.

Manuscripts and stone carving

The ancestry of Romanesque capitals is not to be found wholly in inscriptions. Manuscripts also played an important role in their development. In some instances, interactions between inscriptions and manuscripts are suggested and indeed seem likely though direct evidence remains elusive.

The capitals of the Codex Aureus (mid-eighth century; see figure 9), for example, have features typical of letters cut in stone, notably their small triangular serifs. In the Carolingian period, the Roman square capital found in ancient inscriptions was copied in manuscripts, as in the Lebuinus Codex (825–50; figure 16, opposite). These 'neo-Roman' square capitals were used together with uncials and large insular letterforms. More than a century later in the 'Ansfridus Codex' (950–1000; figure 17), neo-Roman letters and uncials blend to produce identifiably Romanesque capitals, which among other things tend toward equal widths (see A, E, N, R).[18] The capitals of the Ansfridus Codex are no longer classically proportioned.

This sequence of manuscripts suggests that the Carolingian revival of Roman square capitals disrupted developments toward Romanesque capitals.[19] Although several letterforms found in the Codex Aureus (like angular C) also occur in Carolingian manuscripts and inscriptions, the nostalgia for the era of Roman emperors and their signature letters was very strong. So while various mixtures of uncial, insular, and square capital letters can sometimes be found as early as the first half of the ninth century (see also figure 10), it would be another 150 years before a similar mixture appeared in inscriptions.

There is evidence that interactions occurred between scriptoria and building sites, probably resulting in scribes and letter carvers taking note of each other's work.[20] Letter carvers in the eleventh and twelfth centuries would also have been familiar with Roman imperial square capitals. On the outer wall of the Pisa cathedral, for example, fragments of ancient inscriptions are conspicuously integrated into the stonework (figure 18), as are other elements, including the rows of ancient columns in the nave.[21]

18. This phenomenon has occurred before, including during Carolingian period. In the Godescalc-Evangelary, for example, made in Aix-la-Chapelle between 781 and 783, capitals that tend toward equal widths occur next to ones with more classical (varied) widths.
19. Koch (2007), p. 118.
20. Higgitt (1990), (1999), *passim*.
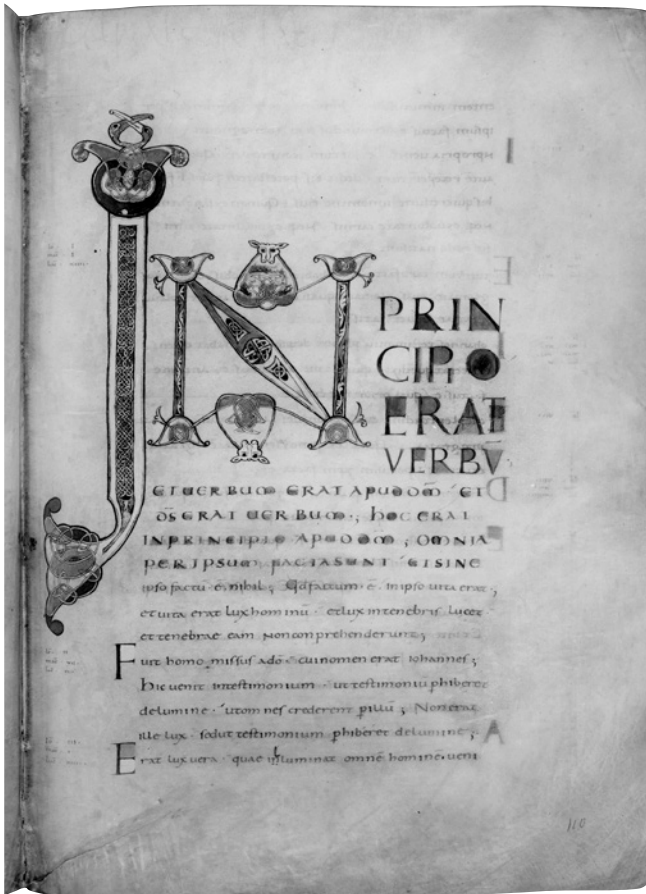21. Conant (1973), pp. 232–3.

Figure 16. Lebuinus Codex, f. 110, made in north-east France between 825 and 850. Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht. The large I and N are insular; the letters of PRINCIPIO ERAT VERBV(M), which imitate Roman square capitals, could be described as 'neo-Roman'. Three lines of uncials follow, after which the text continues in Carolingian minuscules. This ordering demonstrates what has become known as the hierarchy of scripts (Bischoff, 1993, p. 71).
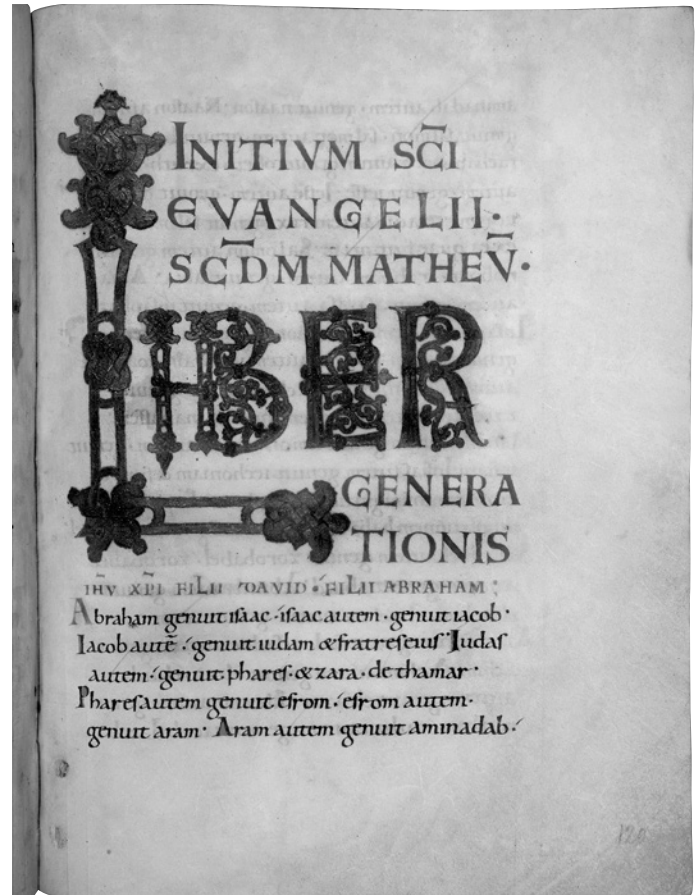
Figure 17. Ansfridus Codex, f. 120, made in St Gallen between 950 and 1000, Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht. The capitals of INITIVM . . . GENERATIONIS feature straight and round E's, spiralling G, M with short diagonals, and R with a double-curved leg. Immediately below, DAVID begins with an uncial and ends with a square capital. The large LIBER is insular.

Developments

A gilt copper plate in Essen with plain wide letterforms, made around 970, shows the Romanesque capital fully developed (figure 19, overleaf).[22] Over the next two centuries, between approximately 1000 and 1200, Romanesque capitals change, becoming generally more complex and more ornamented.

Two examples, one early in this period and the other somewhat late, illustrate the change. Both are found on the bronze doors of the Market Portal of Mainz cathedral. The earlier, which dates to 1009, mentions the patron of the doors, Archbishop Willigis, next to Berengerus, the man who cast them (figure 20, a–b). The later example, the 'Adalbert Privilege' put on the doors around 1135, records the rights of the citizens of Mainz (figure 20c). The letters of the first are a mixture of Carolingian and Romanesque features. They vary significantly in width, a feature reminiscent of the Lebuinus Codex; the long serifs are Carolingian. Romanesque features are A with a

22. Date in Hermann (2011), pp. 10–11. These letterforms, whose proportions are also reminiscent of Carolingian capitals, can be described as Ottonian. As mentioned above, Ottonian art was the north European counterpart of the south European, or First Romanesque style and is considered to belong to the Romanesque period.

Figure 19. Gilt copper plate, part of a large gold cross, *c.* 971. Treasury of Essen cathedral. The inscription mentions an abbess Ida (see Fillitz (1993) pp. 392–3). Notable letters include flat-topped A, wide B whose intersecting round strokes do not meet the vertical stroke, uncial E, S slanting to the left, M with short diagonals, and R with a double-curved leg. These letterforms are early Romanesque, or, following German terminology, Ottonian.

cross-bar at its apex that extends to the left, square C, spiralling G, uncial H and Q, M with diagonals that do not reach the baseline, R with a double-curved leg, clusters of merged letters, and combinations of small and large capitals. The letters of the Adalbert Privilege, by contrast, are thoroughly Romanesque. The inscription includes a considerable number of variants – there are 16 versions of A – as well as angular C, spiralling G, and many uncials, reversed letters, merged letters, and combinations of small and large capitals, some nested.

Another important change during this period can be seen in a stained glass window made around 1150 for the abbey church at Arnstein an der Lahn. It shows a self-portrait of the artist Gerlachus

Figure 20. Inscriptions on the bronze doors of the Market Portal, north side of Mainz cathedral.
(a) Detail of inscription on door panel frame, made shortly before 1009. The inscription mentions Charlemagne; like him, the Ottonian Archbishop Willigis probably wanted to associate himself with imperial Rome.
(b) Detail of inscription on door panel frame, made shortly before 1009.
(c) Detail of the 'Adalbert Privilege', positioned on the upper panel of both doors, *c.* 1135.

Figure 21. Self-portrait of Gerlachus, detail of a stained glass window from the abbey church of Arnstein an der Lahn, *c.* 1150. Westfälisches Landesmuseum, Münster. Various Romanesque features can be observed: the different A's, uncial and capital E's, spiralling G, the curved horizontal part of L, two forms of R, and X with wavy diagonals. Other notable features are the decorative balls positioned at the inside top and base of the two O's, and the small arc in the crossbar of H.

holding a brush in one hand and a paint pot in the other (figure 21). He is painting a text that includes his name. While the letterforms are still Romanesque, they display features characteristic of Gothic capitals. The letters are heavier than those in the Adalbert Privilege for example, and have more pronounced differences between thick and thin parts. They are also more ornamented. Such characteristics are found in manuscripts and frescoes, on windows, and in enamel work before they occur in letters cut in stone.

During the second half of the twelfth century, the number of alternative letterforms that occur in inscriptions declines. They are still found among Gothic capitals though the variety is now greatly reduced (see figure 11). This decline in alternative letterforms and in their irregular distribution runs broadly in parallel with larger social and religious changes in the twelfth century. Principal among these changes was the increasing importance of towns and cities, which in turn attracted theological education away from the monasteries. With this relocation, fascination with Romanesque symbolism diminished as interest in the real world and its representation grew.[23]

The positioning and distribution of Romanesque capitals

The positioning and distribution of insular letterforms, uncials, and square capitals in manuscripts and inscriptions, while irregular, was almost certainly done deliberately.

(1) A basis for irregular positioning and distribution was *varietas*, an important idea in early and medieval Christianity.[24] Varietas can be seen, for example, in the arch of Constantine the Great (*c.* 280–337), whose construction from parts of other buildings (*spolia*) resulted in variety though a mixing of established architectural orders. In Romanesque buildings, older architectural parts were often used; and in Romanesque sculpture, varietas occurs in historiated capitals, for example (as at Moissac), partly to counteract boredom among

23. Duby (2002), pp. 346–8; Hagen (2000), p. 9.

24. This item is based on Carruthers (2009); see especially pp. 15, 20–1, 23–4; the quotation is from p. 23. See also Forsyth (2008).

monks. The monotony of monastic life might also be relieved by variety in reading: 'one should read now things new or then old, now obscure, then plain, … now something serious, then something lighthearted' (Peter of Celle). Varietas also played a role in rhetoric by holding an audience captive by, for example, larding one's speech with humour or anecdotes. Augustine of Hippo (354–430), among others, connected varietas and *diversitas*, referring not to the 'fitness' of the elements together as a whole, but to their great differences which are nonetheless brought together, an apt description of the uses of Romanesque capitals, and especially of their continuously changing positions in text.

(2) The variety found in Romanesque letterforms may reflect the various ways texts and images were 'read' and interpreted in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, or conceptions of the universe. People in the Middle Ages were familiar with fables, mysticism, miracles, and relics, with signs from God and the saints, and with magic.[25]

(3) The irregular positioning of letterforms may also be connected with the medieval interest in language games or patterns of several kinds.[26] This interest can be seen, for example, in leonine verse[27] which has a characteristic internal rhyme pattern. The text of many Romanesque inscriptions take this form, including that at Saint-Paul-de-Varax (figure 28). At Moissac (see figure 4), another language game may also be at work in the mysterious stack of letters at the base of the inscription though their combinations have not yet been convincingly explained.

(4) The distribution of the alternative letterforms in texts and play with letterforms, may also be seen as a kind of game. In these instances, such as the relief sculpture at Toulouse (figure 25), the work of pulling apart of text, which is then woven into the sculpture and to which are added mirrored and double letters, has the effect of making the text mysterious.[28] While it has been assumed that this work was merely evidence of illiteracy among stone cutters, it was instead almost certainly a deliberate taking of liberties.[29]

(5) Possibly the irregular positioning of the alternative letterforms functioned as a mnemonic device or served to make the reader pay attention, so that the texts were better remembered.

In general, multiformity appears to have been important to the medieval mind. Artisans almost certainly took pleasure in letterform variety, in the positioning and distribution of existing forms, and in the creation of new ones. Play with letters and with the language they served was part of the larger context of Romanesque art and architecture, which was also characterized by inventiveness and variation in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. This blossoming multiformity was apparently infectious as architects, artists, artisans, and patrons observed each other's work and were inventive in turn.[30] Variation and change thus became the defining features of Romanesque style.

Album

The inscriptions shown on pp. 19–22 are some of the many examples preserved from the eleventh and twelfth centuries that illustrate variety among Romanesque capitals and their uses.

25. Arnold (2009), pp. 1–7.
26. Forsyth (2008), p. 176.
27. In leonine verse (or leonine hexameter) the last word rhymes with the word before the caesura (usually a caesura penthemimeres) in the middle of the line; see *Einführung in die Lateinische literatur des mittelalterliches Europa*, U. Kindermann, Turnhout, 1989, pp. 113, 117–20.
28. In Santiago de Compostela a similar scattering of letters can be seen next to the statue of St. James on the west front (Fachada da Praza do Obradoiro).
29. Forsyth (2008), p. 166.
30. Schapiro (2006), p. 6.

Figure 22. **Sarcophagus of Bernward of Hildesheim.**

This monument made for Bernward, bishop of
Hildesheim, shortly after his death in 1022, shows fully
developed Romanesque capitals. Bernward was councillor
to Emperor Otto II and his Empress Theophanu and tutor
to Otto III. He also commissioned the magnificent bronze
doors of Hildesheim (1015). The letters on the sarcophagus
are not yet as varied as those in later inscriptions though
most features characteristic of Romanesque capitals are
present. A's are flat topped, some C's are angular, and G is
spiralling. M has short diagonals, and O recurs in several
narrow and pointed versions. Q has a short tail, and the leg
of R is only a single curve. The letters show little difference
between thick and thin parts, straight parts widen toward
their ends, and serifs are short and triangular.

Figure 23. **Inscription (and detail) commemorating the
consecration of the church of St Stephen, Waha.**

The consecreation in 1050 of the church of St Stephen in
Waha, eastern Belgium, is commemorated by this inscrip-
tion, which contains numerous notable features. The serifs
are large, cut clearly and are often forked; angular versions
of round letters are lacking. T is half-uncial with a rounded
underside, and many uncials occur as well including M
(top right). K appears (third line from top) with a curled
upper diagonal in K(A)L(ENDIS). A's have top bars extend-
ing to the left and most incorporate broken middle (cross)
bars. G is spiralling and several S's lean to the left. In the
third and fourth lines from the base, near the middle, con-
tractions for … RUM occur. L from (L)EODECENSI is missing
(fourth line from top). In the same line the terminal M
has been excised from HONORE(M); the resulting HONORE
is equally acceptable in medieval Latin. In the line below
(fifth from top) VICTORIOSIS has been spelled correctly,
presumably in place of a previous error.

Figure 24. **Sarcophagus of Humbertus.**

Figure 25. **Relief sculpture, Toulouse.**

In 1988 restoration work on the Basilica of St Servatius in Maastricht brought to light the sarcophagus of Humbertus, builder of this church and provost from around 1063 until his death in 1086.[31] The heavy lid, which is broken and now lies next to the sarcophagus, originally concealed the inscription from view. The inscription's magnificent large letters carved into the rim of the sarcophagus can now be seen through a small opening in the floor on the west side of the church. A lead cross with a lengthy inscription giving information about the construction of the church was also found inside the sarcophagus.

The inscription contains various uncial forms, including E, H and M (in HVMBERTUS). Angular versions of round letters are lacking. Half-uncial T features a winding curl that joins to the contraction VS. A's are flat topped but pointed in the case of Æ. Narrow L's have horizontal parts running obliquely upwards. M has short diagonals. Both apexes of a single N are pointed while the upper left apex of all other N's are flattened. The O of 'obiit' is slightly pointed; all others are fully rounded. R's employ elegantly curved legs. S is narrow and several lean to the left. An ampersand occurs between ECCLESIÆ and LEODINENSIS derived from the Tironian note for 'et'. A number of letters, such as uncial M and H, curled T (and its contraction), and a single R, are all ornamented with a small terminal ball. This group resembles letters found at the Pieterskerk, Utrecht, which were made more than sixty years later.

31. De la Haye (1988), p. 327.

The bold handling of letterforms and texts by Romanesque stone carvers is demonstrated in this relief showing two women, one bearing a lion cub, the other a lamb. The relief dates to around 1120 and was once part of the Basilica of St Sernin.[32] The text runs (at top): SIGNV(M) LEONIS, SIGNU(M) ARIETIS; and between and below the two women: HOC FUIT FACTUM T TEMPORE IULII CESARIS.

The letters are scattered around and between the women. Two letters among them require additional remarks: the reversed S at the bottom right and the T above TEMPORE. The T has been interpreted either as representing TOLOSÆ (i.e. Toulouse) or is a mistake by the stone carver who instead should have made an I topped by a horizontal bar to produce IN.[33] While the reversed S might also be a mistake, it could equally well provide a symmetrical pairing with the S on the left. Elsewhere in the inscription many familiar Romanesque variants letters appear.

The meaning of the sculpture is not clear. It may be a copy of an earlier sculpture or it may represent an ancient legend associated with Julius Caesar. Contemporary interpretations suggest that it makes reference to medieval zodiacal symbols: the lamb as a precursor of spring, the lion cub, of autumn. Both animals are also representations of Christ.[34]

32. Berne (1999), p. 72.
33. Berne (1999), p. 72.
34. Berne (1999), p. 72.

Figure 26. **The tympanum at Conques (and detail).**

Figure 27. **The Alverata fragment (and detail).**

The tympanum of St Foy, the pilgrimage church at Conques in southern France, features inscriptions carved into bands between the sculptures; the tympanum itself shows traces of colourful paintwork. The whole is dated to between 1125 and 1130.[35]

The letters are fully developed Romanesque capitals. Notable among them are A's with a small flat top and both straight and broken cross bars, round and angular C and E, and capital D both in its classical form and as an uncial. G occurs in both spiralling and angular versions; the cross bar of H features a small arch at its mid-point. M has short diagonals, and its outer strokes are both straight and oblique; an uncial M also occurs. O's are pointed top and bottom, and Q is uncial. R has a double-curved leg, S usually leans to the left, and T is noticeably wide. The inscription contains some ligatures but no nested letters.

This fragment of a memorial stone is mounted to the wall in the courtyard of Sankt Maria im Kapitol, Cologne. A complete text of the inscription was published in 1645;[36] in the part now lacking, Alverata is mentioned. She was probably a nun in a convent situated at that location who died twenty days after entering the order. Nothing more is known about her.

The letterforms are unusual in that the contrast between thin and thick parts is more pronounced than in most Romanesque inscriptions. The letters are elegant with a number of striking variants. These include a graceful L in the centre of the fragment.[37] To its right an uncial D is given an elegant curl; below and to the right a B is formed from two arcs separated at the middle. Elsewhere three spiralling G's occur; the spiral of one becomes angular as it continues to turn inward. Two different ligatures for VS occur in the second line from bottom, and below at left the R is given a kinked leg. There are no angular versions of round letters.

The inscription is difficult to date. There are no traces of the approaching Gothic period though the graceful L and several other decorative forms including the uncial D and the R (lower left) point to the second half of the twelfth century.

36. Gelenius (1645); Kraus (1894), p. 267.

37. A similar L is also found in an inscription on the tympanum of 'dit du Mystère d'Apollon', dating to around 1170, Grand Curtius Museum, Liège.

35. Salvini (1969), p. 327.

Figure 28. **Tympanum (and detail), south front, church at Saint-Paul-de-Varax, northeast of Lyons.**

Figure 29. **Capital (and detail), Basilica of Our Lady, Maastricht.**

The figure of St Anthony can be seen on the tympanum being led by a faun to St Paul the Hermit. The event is described by St Jerome. The tympanum possibly dates to the middle of the twelfth century.[38]

At the right, an angular C occurs in DOCEB(AT); A is given two different forms. Q, at left, is pointed and has a long straight tail. Opposite, Q recurs but in uncial form; next to it is N with a short diagonal. The diagonals of several A's and V's become abruptly wider halfway along one or other of their strokes.

The tympanum is missing part of its keystone; the loss has halved the P in PAULV(M). The poor joins among the stones suggest that the tympanum was possibly moved at one time, or that the sculpture and the arch (and inscription) were made separately and did not join together satisfactorily when assembled. The A at the far left may belong to DOCEB(AT) (at right) or is the start of an unfinished text.[39]

This capital is in the choir aisle of the Basilica of Our Lady, Maastricht, and has been dated to 1150–60.[40] The scene is of Abraham and a servant bringing food to three men (Genesis 18: 5–8); the text, 'veneratur et orat' (He worships and prays) means that Abraham recognised God in the three men.[41]

The inscription shows a familiar Romanesque combination of square capitals and uncials. Although there are no angular versions of round letters, the second T (from left), derived from an uncial or a half-uncial, incorporates an angular element where, in other inscriptions, a curve is generally found. This T is comparable to the spiralling G in the Alverata fragment whose curve becomes angular as it spirals inward (see figure 27, detail).

38. Favreau (1997), p. 20.
39. Favreau (1997), p. 20.

40. Den Hartog (2002), p. 260.
41. Bosman (1990), p. 72–3.

Revivals

The integration of Gothic characteristics in Romanesque capitals towards the end of the twelfth century led to the latter's gradual disappearance. But in the following centuries, Romanesque capitals reappear at various times in paintings, on sculpture, in architecture, as elements in applied art, and most recently in typeface design.

Among the earliest of those who later adopted Romanesque capitals are painters working in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. They include Simone Martini and Lippo Memmi whose *Annunciation* of 1333, for the Siena cathedral (now in the Uffizi Gallery) shows late Romanesque capitals and variants. Later, Romanesque capitals can be found, for example, in Jan van Eyck's *Adoration of the Lamb*, 1432, in Saint Bavo Cathedral, Ghent. Van Eyck's painting includes a flat-topped A, angular C, angular and uncial E's, spiralling G, M with short diagonals and in uncial form, as well as a number of other typical Romanesque letters.[42]

In Italy in the second half of the fourteenth century, early humanists copied the Carolingian minuscule and transformed it into the humanistic minuscule. Early in the following century stone carvers imitated Romanesque capitals in their inscriptions,[43] together with a very limited number of other typical Romanesque ingredients. These capitals are now usually described as early renaissance or humanist. Commonly among the revived Romanesque capitals the slight difference between the thick and thin parts remained, as did the widening of straight parts toward their ends. But the triangular serifs often added to Romanesque capitals were now usually made smaller and sometimes disappeared altogether, while uncials and angular versions of round letters were not revived. The monumental tomb of Cardinal Chiavez in Rome, dated 1447, is exemplary of these developments (figure 30).

42. Gray (1986), p. 133; Smeyers (1996), pp. 403–14.
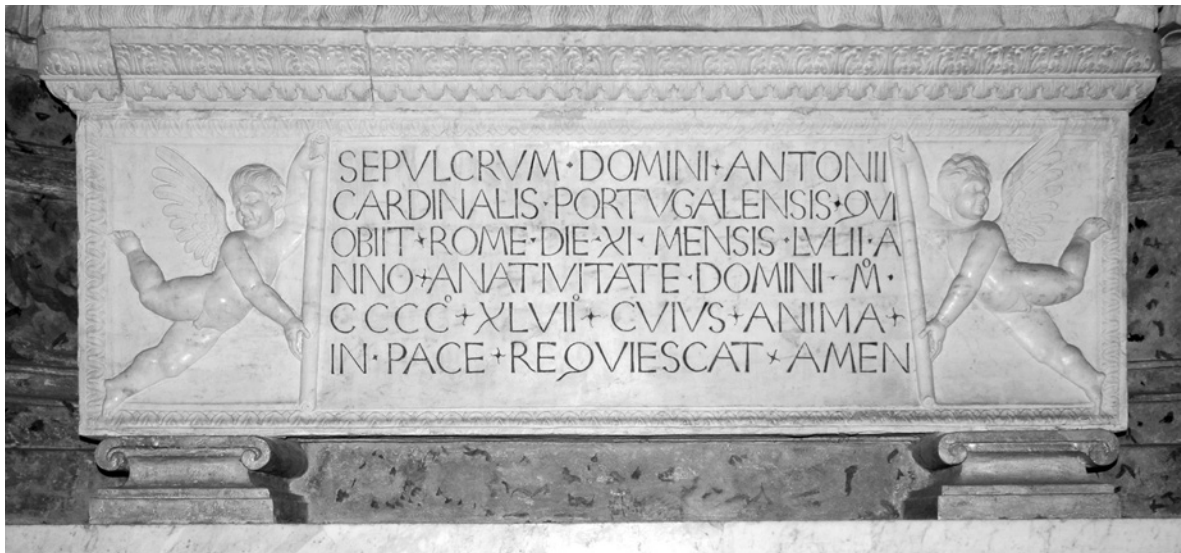
43. Gray (1986), pp. 122–33.

Figure 30. Tomb of Cardinal Martinez de Chiavez, Basilica of St John Lateran, Rome, 1447.

Figure 31. Gravestone for the
Huguenot Sara le Bachellé, Hameln,
Lower Saxony, 1740.

Figure 32. Romanesque capitals cut
into the wooden doors of the cathe-
dral at Le Puy-en-Velay. From Day
(1902b).

44. Gray (1986), p. 133.
45. Bartram (1986), pp. 20–5.
46. Gray (1986), pp. 146–50.

Discovering why painters, sculptors, and architects revived the
Romanesque capitals at this time is difficult. Nicolete Gray assumed
that an aversion to the Gothic played a part.[44] A second possible rea-
son was the relative prevalence and visibility of Romanesque inscrip-
tions at that time and up to the seventeenth century, far more so
than is the case today following the rebuilding or demolition of many
Romanesque buildings in the intervening period.

Although by the early sixteenth century, and over the succeeding
decades, Romanesque capitals would be displaced in Rome by the
revived square capital of the imperial era, elsewhere in Europe fea-
tures of Romanesque capitals continued to be used in the sixteenth,
seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries as one model among others.
The letterforms show familiar characteristics: straight parts that
widen towards the ends, often with triangular serifs; A with a bro-
ken crossbar; M with short diagonals; and R with a double-curved
leg. These characteristics can found in inscriptions in Britain,[45]
the Netherlands, Austria, and Germany (figure 31).[46]

In the nineteenth century Romanesque capitals were revived
again, this time more accurately than in the three preceding centu-
ries. The earlier revivals had become so varied that in many cases
they only vaguely resembled their historical models. Nineteenth-
century versions, on the other hand, were more faithful, while accu-
rate reproductions could be found in books such as Henry Shaw's
The handbook of Mediaeval alphabets and devices (1853; see figures
10, 11) and Lewis F. Day's *Lettering in ornament*, which illustrates, for
example, letters on the cathedral doors at Le Puy-en-Velay (figure 32).

Figure 33. Weiss-Lapidar typeface,
Emil Rudolf Weiss, *c*. 1931.

Figure 34. Typeface design, René
Knip, for the Old Church Foundation,
Amsterdam, 1999.

Twentieth-century work based on Romanesque letterforms occurs among typeface designers. One example is Weiss-Lapidar, a titling (all-capitals) alphabet in two weights by Emil Rudolf Weiss (figure 33). The letters A, E, and G were provided with Romanesque alternatives while throughout the strokes were nearly monoline, ending in very small serifs. It seems possible that the design was inspired by the nineteenth-century interest in Romanesque letters or by an increasing interest in the Romanesque period among art historians of the early twentieth century. That 'Lapidar' was made part of the typeface name suggests that Weiss had seen examples of original inscriptions though nothing is known about this.[47] A more recent example is a design by René Knip. His alphabet for the Old Church Foundation, Amsterdam, made in 1999, contains numerous references to Romanesque capitals including round and angular C, E, and T; uncial D, H, M, and U; spiralling G; and pointed O (figure 34). Knip's source was the German edition of Day's *Alphabets old & new*, from which he developed this fantasy alphabet.[48]

47. In his recent biography of Weiss, Cinamon (2010), p. 109, remarks on the 'medieval character' of Weiss-Antiqua, a typeface related to Weiss-Lapidar and released by Bauersche Giesserei at the same time (1931). Nothing further has been discovered about the relationship between Weiss's work and medieval sources. Weiss (1875–1942) made frequent use of Romanesque-like letterforms for book covers and title pages, as did other German typographers including Ernst Schneidler; it seems that none of them recorded their reasons for doing so.

48. Rene Knip, e-mail to the author, 26 March 2012. Lewis F. Day, *Alte und neue alphabete*, 1922, revised by Hermann Delitsch, Leipzig: Karl W. Hiersemann Verlag.

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Several sources cited below offer substantial overviews of the topic. Nicolete Gray's *A history of lettering* (1986) contains valuable illustrations of Romanesque capitals in their historical context, in manuscripts as well as inscriptions. Her introduction to the subject is helpful though I disagree with her underlying thesis that the Romanesque was a period only of letterform experimentation without stable, durable or fixed models. Walter Koch's *Inschriftenpaläographie des abendländischen Mittelalters und der früheren Neuzeit* (2007) shows and discusses Romanesque inscriptions both in historical and geographical contexts, though again I am unable to agree with his conclusion that Romanesque letterforms are only transitional between Carolingian and Gothic. The more than one hundred publications in the series 'La nuit des temps' by Zodiaque show work across the whole of Romanesque Europe. Although the series focuses on architecture, many important inscriptions are illustrated and described. Inscriptions in Germany are also illustrated and meticulously documented in the series *Die Deutschen Inschriften* (more than 80 volumes by several publishers). The aim of this long-term project is to cover the whole of Germany. The 'Corpus des Inscriptions de la France médiévale' (CNRS Éditions) has a similar aim for inscriptions in France. Many inscriptions may also be found online at 'The corpus of Romanesque sculpture in Britain and Ireland' (www.crsbi.ac.uk) and 'Deutsche Inschriften online' (www.inschriften.net).

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Images / photography

Berges (1983): figure 22

Gerry Leonidas: figure 12

Musée des Augustins, Toulon: figure 25

Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht: figure 17

Alexander Nagel: figure 31

R. Oursel, *La France romane*, pt 1, L'Abbaye de Sainte-Marie de la Pierre-Qui-Vire, 1991: figure 4a

Rijksdienst voor archeologie, cultuurlandschap en monumenten, Zeist: figure 5a–c

Royal Library, Stockholm: figure 9

Silvagni (1935): figure 15

Gerard Unger: figures 1a–c, 2a–b, 3, 4b, 7a–b, 13, 14, 18, 20a–c, 23, 24, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30