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A squeeze from the Central Lettering Record and the lettering legacy of Nicolete Gray

A squeeze is a paper impression of the surface of an inscription useful in the study of epigraphy since the sixteenth century. One of the earliest known squeezes was found in the papers of Jean Matal (c.1517–97) who studied inscriptions as sources of law, though the more regular epigraphic use of squeezes was established only in the seventeenth century by Rafaello Fabretti (1619–1700) as part of his work towards *Inscriptorium antiquarian quad in aedibus paternis asservantur explicatio* (1699). And while contemporary photographic methods allow for a multi-dimensional recording of inscriptions, the physicality of the squeeze as an artefact and the capacity to preserve an accurate 1:1 copy of the original inscription for offsite study remains advantageous in many instances.

A squeeze is made by dampening down the inscription to be recorded, then placing a water-soaked piece of squeeze paper (chemical filter paper) over the lettering surface, before hitting the stone with a rectangular-headed squeeze brush at an angle of 90 degrees, to push the paper into the cut letterforms. The paper is left to dry in situ. Once removed, the squeeze should show a 'negative' image of the inscription, with the letterforms more prominent on the underside of the squeeze, where the paper is in direct contact with the stone it records.

This squeeze is displayed with the underside of the dried paper to the fore, so that the three-dimensional qualities of the letterforms as recorded are most evident, though they require reading in reverse. An ability to read Latin backwards would once have been the scholarly norm for epigraphers, but, now that squeezes can be scanned and the image digitally flipped on screen, this former limitation has been overcome.

The inscription reads: D(is) M(anibus). / Ragoniae Piae, uxori / Aureli Hermetis, / parentes eius / fecerunt / M(arcus) Ragonius Blastus et / Ragonia Vera et sibi et / suìs libertis libertabusque / posterìsque eorum. It is taken from a marble funerary slab dating from 101–200 AD and records the following, 'Dedicated to the spirits of the dead. Marcus Ragonius Blastus and Ragonia Vera, her parents, made this for Ragonia Pia, wife of Aurelius Hermes, and for themselves and their family, for their freedmen and -women, and for their descendents.'

According to the Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum (*CIL*), this epitaph plaque was found in the early seventeenth century in a cemetery that was later covered by the Basilica of Saint Peter. Since 1867 however, the plaque has formed a part of the collections of the British Museum (inv.1867,0508.58) where this squeeze was made for the purposes of studying the elegant Imperial letterforms more closely.

Central Lettering Record

The squeeze is a part of the collections of the Central Lettering Record (CLR), a collection of letterform study materials originated at the Central School of Arts & Crafts in 1963 by tutor Nicholas Biddulph with two main aims – to broaden understanding of letters as forms, and to better delineate the practice of lettering from that of typography. The revival in lettering and calligraphy so inspired by Edward Johnston's classes at the Central School at the turn of the century had by the 1950s and early 1960s begun to give way to the concerns of the Continental modern movement in typography.

The starting point for the CLR collections was a set of photographs of inscriptions in Rome taken by typographic historian James Mosley. These images fulfilled Biddulph's ambition of showing, 'the quality and variety of the Roman achievement' in lettering. That is to say, Mosley's photographs offered a broader view of Roman lettering than that offered within contemporary practice or debate, which, for Biddulph and others, had ossified and become overly focused on a model for letterforms identified with the much-lauded inscription at the base of the Trajan Column in Rome.

As lettering scholar and historian Nicolete Gray observed in her seminal guide *Lettering on buildings* (1960), 'it seems that our twentieth-century Roman letter is based not so much in, or study of, actual Roman achievement as on a choice of one type of Roman letter which has been recognized as perfect… identified for convenience and through laziness with that of Trajan's column.'

Gray joined the teaching staff at the Central in 1964 and was most likely responsible for the creation or the instigation of the squeeze on display. The letterforms the squeeze records evidence all the refinements of the inscriptional square capitals so definitive of the Imperial era and are dated from the same century as the Trajan inscription. Yet they are subtly different from the Trajan letter. Note the flat-topped junctions here of the diagonal and vertical strokes of the Ms and Ns, and the fuller-bellied bottom bowl of the Bs. Nothing remarkable, yet this is just one squeeze from a drawerful made by Gray and her students by way of documenting the very many small differences between inscriptions, so as to better understand actual and not idealized practice.

Nicolete Gray (1911–97)

Gray would have been familiar with the use of squeezes as a study technique having trained in epigraphy. A scholarship to read history at Lady Margaret Hall at Oxford in 1929 kindled an early enthusiasm for early medieval manuscripts. This was followed by a scholarship in 1932 to the British School at Rome to study early post-classical inscriptions in Italy. (Her paper on the 'Paleography of Latin inscriptions in the eighth, ninth and tenth Centuries in Italy' was eventually published after the busyness of early married life abated in 1948). Her early affinity with letters as forms is noted by fellow

historian Nicholas Barker in his evocative description of her student years, 'With Dielh's *Inscriptiones Latinae* in hand, she wandered from place to place, making squeezes, papier-maché moulds, from the stones, which gave her a direct feel for the three-dimensional quality of lettering that lasted the rest of her life.'

What would prove so distinctive about Gray's feel for lettering as it came to shape her understanding of the field was its scope and the very particular way that she was able to situate her scholarship at the points of overlap between traditionally separate disciplines.

This was in part a reflection of the artistic and scholarly milieu which had shaped the breadth of her intellectual outlook since childhood. As the daughter of Laurence Binyon, poet and Keeper of Prints & Drawings at the British Museum, her social circle reads like an index of key artists and writers of the twentieth century.

In 1937 her husband Basil Gray published *The English print*, to which she contributed two chapters requiring an examination of Victorian printing, and introducing her to nineteenth century typefaces. The following year she published *XIXth century ornamented types and title pages*, her own remarkable history of these widely ignored types. Her since reprinted (1976) and now much sought-after account of them was also widely ignored, until mainstream tastes caught up and public interest in the 'vernacular' came to fruition in the celebrations of the 1951 Festival of Britain.

And so by 1956, when writing about the palaeography of the third century, Gray was able to contextualize the study of the fiddly inscripitional Filocalian letter within an overview of ornamented (and specifically bifurcated) letters which drew upon her epigraphic insights, her knowledge of medieval manuscripts, and the Tuscan types of the Victorian era.

Working across epigraphy, calligraphy, art history and typography, Gray forged what she hoped would become the boundaryless study of 'lettering'. In her scoping volume *A history of lettering* she defines it as, 'a sub-division of writing … in which the visual form, that is the letters and the way in which these are shaped and combined, has a formality and an importance over and above bare legibility. It can therefore be an art.'

For Gray, understanding and thus unlocking the expressive potential of this art of lettering in practice was the primary goal and she used writing, exhibitions, teaching and the CLR itself to champion formal invention with the goal of inspiring those working with letterforms of all kinds to reinvigorate practice.

Her legacy remains in the drawers of photographs she took or encouraged others to take; photographs often of things too 'vulgar' to have been afforded much attention elsewhere, such as the examples of experimental plastic boutique lettering in Paris or hand-painted Italian café signage from the 1970s. These and several thousand other CLR images now form part of the Museum & Study

Collections held (and still used within teaching) within the Graphic Communication Design studios at Central Saint Martins and available for reference by appointment.

Gray's legacy of images and artefacts speaks against doctrinaire ideas. Instead it pleads for experimentation. Please don't be fooled by the seeming elegance and poise of this squeeze. It is part of a collection which seeks to challenge you to look closer, to question more rigorously and to come to your own unfettered conclusions about the way forwards.

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