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Alverata, hedendaagse Europese letters met wortels in de middeleeuwen

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16 Summary

The subject of this thesis is *Alverata*, a twenty-first-century typeface whose design was inspired by the shapes of Romanesque capitals such as those found in inscriptions of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

The inscriptions of the Romanesque period are characterized by letterforms that were employed with great originality and in extraordinary variety, chiselled in stone, painted on walls, engraved in metal and executed in other ways. What turned the capitals in inscriptions dating from shortly before AD 1000 to soon after 1200 into Romanesque capitals was the mixing and matching of characters from three different scripts. The result is a single script, a homogeneous set of letterforms, a clear and enduring model with basic forms and details that for two hundred years were shared by the vast majority of Romanesque capitals and which spread over the whole of Europe. The Romanesque letterforms used in inscriptions were constantly varied on the basis of this clear and enduring model, often by apparently arbitrary variation in the positioning of the three sorts of letter. In inscriptions, Romanesque capitals gradually mutated into Gothic capitals, particularly in the second half of the twelfth century. Romanesque letters can be seen as European letters, just as those of *Alverata* can: they permit the reproduction of all the languages and dialects of Europe (and can also be extended beyond its borders).

The key questions addressed in this thesis are these: *how can a medieval concept of letterforms be combined with a modern typographic concept, and how can such a combination be used to design a typeface for the twenty-first century?* These questions have their roots in my fascination for the Romanesque capitals in inscriptions, for their richness of form and the amazing variety in the ways they were used, and in my wish to connect these letterforms with the modern practice of typography.

The thesis is in three parts: 1) Romanesque capitals in inscriptions, 2) type design in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and 3) how *Alverata* was designed using a combination of the medieval concept and the modern.

Chapter 2 (of part one) is an account of how my interest in Romanesque capitals in inscriptions came about and flourished. I first made their acquaintance in 1976, in Moissac, France, for a long time after which my interest lay dormant. Then in 2003 it was reawakened by a visit to the basilica of St Servatius in Maastricht, with its tomb of provost Humbertus of 1086. Chapter 3 describes the terminology and dating of inscriptions, methods of transcription etc. Chapter 4 turns to matters of time, place and style: the circumstances under which Romanesque capitals took shape and were used, and European history between 950 and 1250, a period in which the political contours of modern Europe started to emerge, some of the continent's major states began to take shape, and what were to become today's European languages could already be heard and read. Today the Romanesque style is regarded as the first European style.

The Romanesque capitals in inscriptions are themselves the focus of chapter 5, which looks at their origins, characteristics and variants. The three scripts that were their precursors are the medieval descendants of the Roman *capitalis quadrata*, a series of uncials (and some half-uncials and minuscules), and Insular letterforms. The angular versions of rounded letters belong to Insular art, the mixture of mainly Irish Celtic elements with Anglo-Saxon forms and motifs. The uncials arose in the fourth century in

the Mediterranean area, probably in north Africa. In 597 uncials were brought to England by St Augustine, a Roman monk at the head of a group of missionaries. The descendants of the Roman square capitals were combined with the uncials and the angular Insular forms and taken together to the European continent, first by Hiberno-Scottish monks in the first half of the seventh century. They established monasteries which included those at Luxueil and Bobbio. Towards the end of the seventh and in the eighth century Anglo-Saxon missionaries such as St Boniface and St Willibrord also took the mixture of the three letterforms and uncials with them; this then spread widely through monasteries such as the abbey at Echternach. It is probable that uncials also penetrated north of the Alps through the agency of clergy travelling between Rome and northern Europe. The three sorts of letter were adapted to each other in terms of proportions and detailing. Important features of the Romanesque capitals in inscriptions include low stroke contrast (little difference between thick and thin parts), gradual transitions from thick to thin, straight parts widening toward their ends, and small, triangular serifs.

Romanesque capitals were varied endlessly. The three sorts of letter were joined together to make ligatures and were intertwined, small examples being nested – placed inside or alongside the capitals – and both letters and the spaces between them would often be widened or narrowed, often to fit text into the space available but sometimes for no apparent reason. The most intriguing of these variations is the seemingly random positioning of Insular letterforms and uncials in a text. The cradle of Romanesque capitals was probably an area extending from northern France to central Germany.

By no means all these variations occurred in every inscription. The angular variants of round letters and the uncials were never evenly distributed nor were they in constant use. At the beginning of the twelfth century the angular versions of round letters began to lose ground, and in the second half of the century they became positively rare. Uncials took longer to be regularly used in inscriptions than angular variants, but were used throughout the Romanesque period before ultimately evolving into the gothic capitals. Several explanations have been put forward for the constantly shifting positions of the various versions of these letters. Variation, *varietas*, was fundamental to Romanesque art and architecture. It included the deliberate mixing of elements of earlier structures, such as columns, with new inventions. Mixing three sorts of letter to create a single system in which the use of individual sorts was varied reflected this. Not only were medieval clerics fond of linguistic games, they also practised a layered exegesis of the Bible. Both goals could be served by the shuffling of letterforms. It may also have acted to remind readers of saints such as Boniface who brought the Insular forms and the uncials to continental Europe.

The distribution, evolution and use of Romanesque capitals are illustrated in an album (chapter 6) with a selection from the many inscriptions surviving in Europe. These examples are arranged chronologically and selected so as to be distributed as evenly as possible over the Romanesque period and geographically within Europe, and are provided with explanatory notes. It is reasonable to suppose that many of the variations in letterforms represent the personal interpretations of the stonemasons or their masters.

Chapter 7 focuses on the medieval stonemasons, in so far as we know anything about them. How did they design and then execute their inscriptions, and did the mechanics of incising letters affect the shapes of the letters thus produced? Who were the patrons

and who the executants, was cutting letters a trade, how literate were the masons, and was their literacy relevant? These are questions that it is almost impossible to answer. The names of many who created letters in the Romanesque period have survived – in stone, on glass and other materials – but we have personal details of only a few of them, and such details themselves are sparse. It seems probable that for two centuries the stonemasons worked to a tradition, at least as regards their letterforms. This much is demonstrated by similarities in letterforms ranging from soon after 1000 to late in the twelfth century. Because Romanesque capitals in inscriptions occur almost exclusively in Christian texts and on Christian buildings, it is legitimate to ask whether these are Christian letters. However, like elements of Romanesque architecture – the round arch, in particular – many Romanesque letterforms are survivors of pre-Christian times, as well as being used later for secular purposes. In essence, letters are neutral and can be used in every conceivable context.

The concrete data brought together in the preceding chapters become the basis for the concept behind the Romanesque capitals in inscriptions as it is formulated in chapter 8. They are the fundamental forms of the letters and their most important details, the variation in applications, stylistic changes, and the letterforms' cosmopolitan nature.

Romanesque letterforms did not disappear at the end of the twelfth century: they were repeatedly reused and since 1200 have inspired an unending succession of artists, stonemasons, type designers and others. The first part of the book ends with a description of the principal revivals.

Part two, about type design in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, describes the technical and technological changes that took place between the end of the nineteenth century and the present, from the invention and development of typesetting and casting machines up to digital typesetting and design, the Internet, and reading texts on digital displays. Then come the most important developments in graphic design, typography and type design up to the present day. This recent history is discussed in the context of its impact on my own work and the design of *Alverata*. Whereas type design in the twentieth century was based largely on historical models, there was also enthusiasm for the future, with some – notably the Futurists themselves – dismissing the past as irrelevant. Proposals for renewal, leading to modernism, went neck to neck with the appreciation of history that gave rise to modern classicism. After 1945 these two currents of thought were often intermingled, but the old tenets continued to survive and towards the end of the fifties modernism made a comeback. Under the influence of societal change, this revitalized modernism came to be overshadowed by much more informal typography, boosted by the arrival of e.g. small printing machines. The result was that much printing came to be done by people who were not printers (in the old sense) and hence beyond the reach of established typographical traditions. This trend was in turn reinforced by the arrival of small computers which could run programs that enabled the owner to design not only his own types but also his own complete graphic design. What followed was a constant succession of approaches to type design and typography, culminating in the final decade of the twentieth century with the virtual abandonment of established typographical patterns.

Following the waning of this movement at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it

is now possible to discern a number of principal currents in type design. For the time being, many designers are continuing to take complete ownership of the letterforms and subject them to far-reaching personal rearrangement. By now, however, individual interests have been joined by growing attention to new forms of collaboration between designers and new combinations, for example bringing together scripts from differing cultures – Asiatic, say, together with Latin. Alongside undiminished interest in classical serifed types, neutral sans serifs are now much in vogue. We have custom types: fonts, designed for businesses and organizations, which, so far as that is possible, are intended to endow such institutions with a unique public face. There is also the early twenty-first-century model, whose letters have been brought closer together in the horizontal dimension, some narrow letterforms being widened and some wide letters being narrowed. The difference between thick and thin is slight, the serifs are usually short and sturdy. The advantage of letterforms like these is that they work all the way through the spectrum from very large to very small sizes, in addition to which they can be used with virtually all technologies and in every medium: from ink jet and laser printers to high-quality offset, on smooth and rough paper, and on monitors and displays both old and new. It is a robust and flexible model whose origins lie in the twentieth century, particularly in news faces. And from the beginning of the twenty-first century it has increasingly been the starting point for type designers.

One aspect of the original version of modernism deserves special attention: pure form, abstractions whose very essence lies in the shaping and genesis of the outline or silhouette. Pure form plays an important part in my own conception of type design. Apart from inspiration from the arts, twentieth-century type designers were often in search of purely practical solutions. Taken together, these are discussed as 'typographical pragmatism' – a view of the field whose effects can also be discerned in my own work. The design of *Alverata* is influenced by the work of some famous predecessors, for example William Addison Dwiggins and Roger Excoffon. Also treated separately, in the light of the fact that it is now the prime driver of the scope and reach of a type design, is the development of the large type family.

With its *incise* class, Maximilien Vox's typeface classification offers the surprising possibility of bringing Romanesque and modern letterforms together in a single category. One is struck by the echoes continuing to ring out from the Middle Ages. Examples of these are provided. This is followed by a statement of my own position, which is humanistic in that it centres on readers and their expectations and habits, and which encompasses experiment – generally in such a way that it is just imperceptible to readers.

The second part of the book ends with a description of the modern-day concept. Part 3 describes the combination of that concept with the Romanesque, and the design of the new typeface *Alverata*. The schedule of requirements lists a number of practical and current preconditions for good reproduction of letters on paper and digital displays – for example, it is important that text should be pleasant to read on the comparatively small displays of mobile telephones. *Alverata* is a modern and individual design, inspired by the Romanesque examplars without being a close imitation of them. It is based on the early twentieth-century model, but tweaked so as to prevent blandness and monotony. The design displays the designer's personality with taut curves and substantial counters, making the letterforms in the larger sizes attractive in appearance and in the smaller

lively and open. *Alverata* is a large type family, including as it does an 'irregular' in addition to the usual fonts such as light, normal, bold or extra bold, roman and italic. In this irregular version the experiment is clearly apparent to the reader, being inspired by the Insular letterforms, the uncials, and their constantly changing positioning. *Alverata* has been combined with other scripts, starting with Greek and Cyrillic. Later it will be possible to add more, such as those of Arabic and a variety of Indian and other languages. The design contains the characters needed for all European languages and minority languages. It represents languages such as Czech and Maltese, with numerous accented characters and unique letter combinations, accurately and unobtrusively. In legibility and readability research, various versions of *Alverata*, such as the irregular and versions with subtle but essential variations, may serve to give type design a broader scientific basis and to help reveal more data with which type designers can then work on meeting the needs of readers.