

The true source of the sans (Part One)

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Hello, I'm Jon Melton – thank you for coming, [pause]...

# 1779

Royal Academy summer exhibition.

In the summer of 1779 a set of three design drawings were submitted to the Royal Academy in London.

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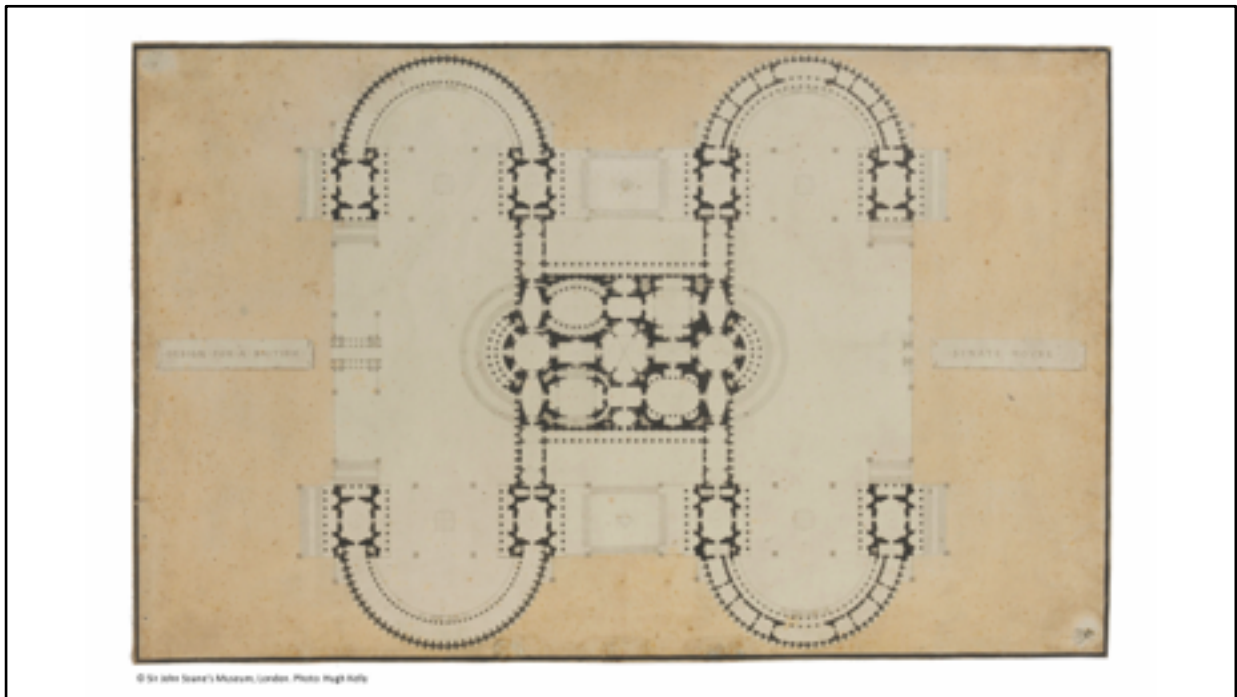


Exhibit number '308', consisted of: a section, elevation and... a Plan drawing which included two distinctive title blocks rendered as Roman *tabula ansata* (which are stylised writing tablet motifs).

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The letterforms used within these blocks are relatively geometric, near monoline and had squared off terminals with NO SERIFS. This was a radical departure from the serif typography of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

The Design plan was for a British Senate House by a young Architect called – John Soan[e]. Who was on a funded scholarship *Grand Tour* of Italy from 1778-1780. (Seen here aged 23).


But he didn't execute the drawing himself. It was generated by an employed draftsman and the drawing is recorded as 'Italian Hand – unidentified' ? !

This drawing has been identified by James Mosley, as the earliest example of a deliberate Sans Serif in Britain (and possibly the world) and if anyone here knows of any earlier European examples, I very much would like to speak with them in the break.

Soane's inspiration for his Serif-less Letterforms has become something of a 'Holy Grail' for typographers, type designers and design historians. As it is the possible origin and LEGACY of all the Sans Serifs of Today which represent our modern, commercial and technical world.

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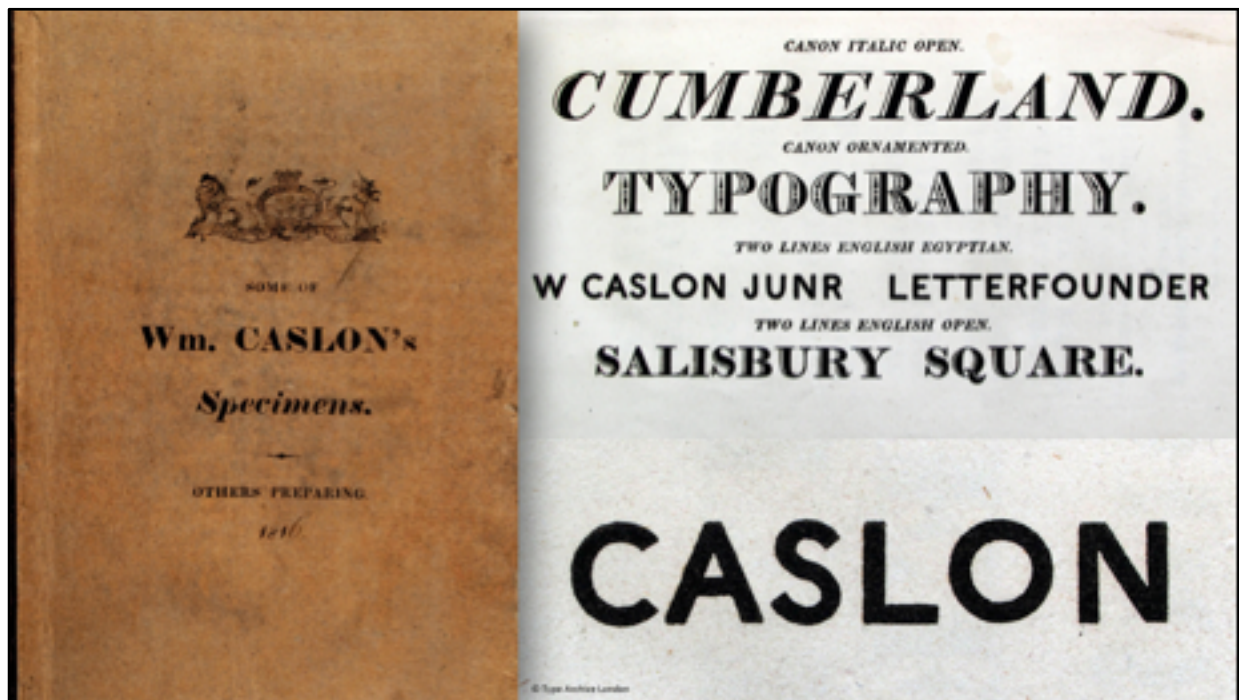
c.1816

The first Sans-serif metal type.

As we all know. The earliest known Metal Type Specimen of a Sans-serif, is recorded as 1816 in a specimen book by William Caslon the IV.

But some page-sections have recently been dated by John A. Lane as potentially, printed as early as 1812.

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In the 1816 Caslon Specimen, the sans serif is named as 'Two Lines English Egyptian'. Seen in CAPS only, it was to be used as titling.

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# 1779-1816

A quarter of a century gap.

This leaves a quarter of a century GAP between Soane's Serif-less titling on his drawing — and our first Sans serif metal type.

This last quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century is thinly populated with examples of serif-less letterform titling on drawings and engravings principally by the Architect Sir John Soane, or from his close circle, such as sculptors Thomas Banks and John Flaxman.

Some of Soane's drawings even propose inscriptions of Sans serif letters on his buildings, but I've only been able to find ONE still in existence...

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From 1784 onwards John Soane slowly promotes his serif-less letterforms on his drawings, and above is an elevation drawing for two gate-house Lodges at Langley Park in Norfolk, England by Soane.

The South Lodges elevation is dated 1790, and has a pair of stone Greyhounds depicted with the inscription of the Beauchamp Family motto: *TOUJOURS FIDELE* (Always Faithful) rendered on the plinths beneath dogs with shields. The commissioned designs for Langley Park began as early as 1784 and were eventually completed by 1793.

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1793

Earliest known extant Soane Sans.

So this design for armorial greyhound statues remains an early example of an intentional use of sans serif letterform...

→



Which still exist today! Very much generated in the Soane style of serif-less letterforms with a wide 'T' based upon a square, a near full circle 'O', equilateral 'V' and bullets between words.

→



These inscriptional letters combined with the best examples of Soane's titling on his drawings, has informed a research font called Soane Sans. Originally only in CAPS but now extended into lower-case.

Soane's work seems to be the primary instigation and influence on the first Sans Serif types of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century — so if we knew Soane's reference for them, an evolutionary puzzle would be solved.

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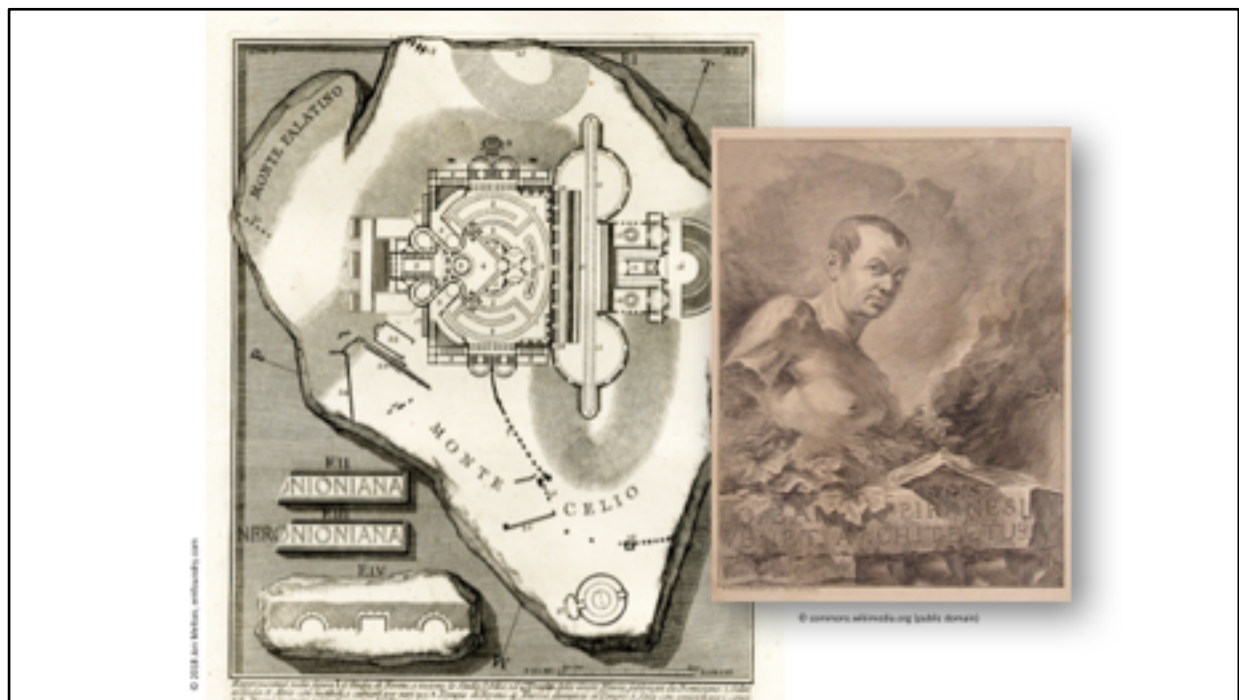
# 1756

The source of Soane's serif-less letterforms?

‘Cutting to the chase’ after many months of research, I eventually came across an engraving, by a well known Italian architect and engraver — which has been... in front of us, all the time!

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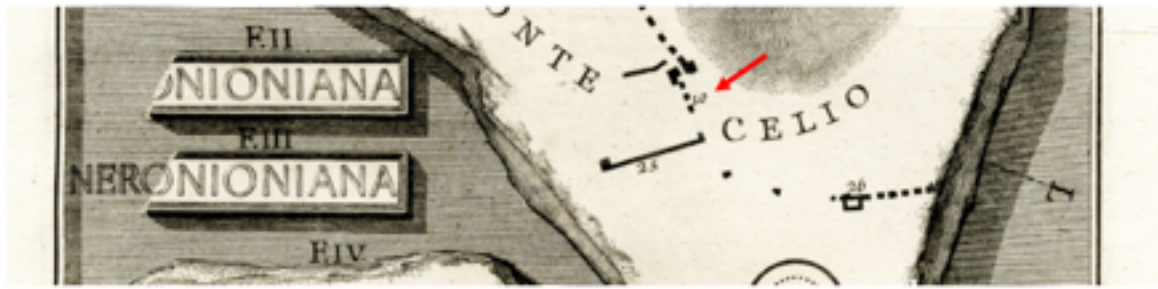




Tom.I. (**Volume I.**) [Tav].XLI (**Plate.41**) Pianta del Ninfeo di Nerone, from **Giovanni Battista Piranesi's** *Le Antichita Romane* of **1756**.

The similarities of Nero's Nymphaeum with Soane's proposed Senate House strikes you immediately. Both are plans of grandiose Roman architecture, both have two dominant title blocks, both title blocks are rendered as stone antiquities... And both use inscriptions of serif-less letterforms.

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These *serif-less* Letterforms are deliberately constructional, geometrically realised, and nearly monoline.

Piranesi records [here](#), an archeological fragment with the partial Roman Inscription of: 'ONIONIANA', expanded in Fig.III (Figure 3) to suggest that the complete inscription would have read: 'NERONIANIANA'. Meaning: 'That of AND in the Reign of [Emperor] Nero'.

The text at the foot of the Plate.XLI (41) references position 10 on the plan...

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Piranesi's engraved lettering is radically charged for the mid-18<sup>th</sup> Century. It appears to be similar visually, to the Forma Urbis Fragments drawn by Piranesi on a number of the preceding plates in Le Antichità Romane.

More significantly: within the Title Page frontispiece, and en mass within 'Roma' — the map engraving at the front of the publication.

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Piranesi's fascination with Forma Urbis Romae – the fragmentary map of Rome created between 203 and 211 AD – began, whilst working as an understudy to the engraver Giambattista Nolli.

Nolli had direct access to the Forma Urbis fragments at the Capitoline Museum and produced, with Piranesi's support and artistry, the celebrated "Nolli Map": Nuova Pianta di Roma in 1748.

Plate.14 seen above has the position of the sans serif ONIONIANA fragment indicated with the red arrow.

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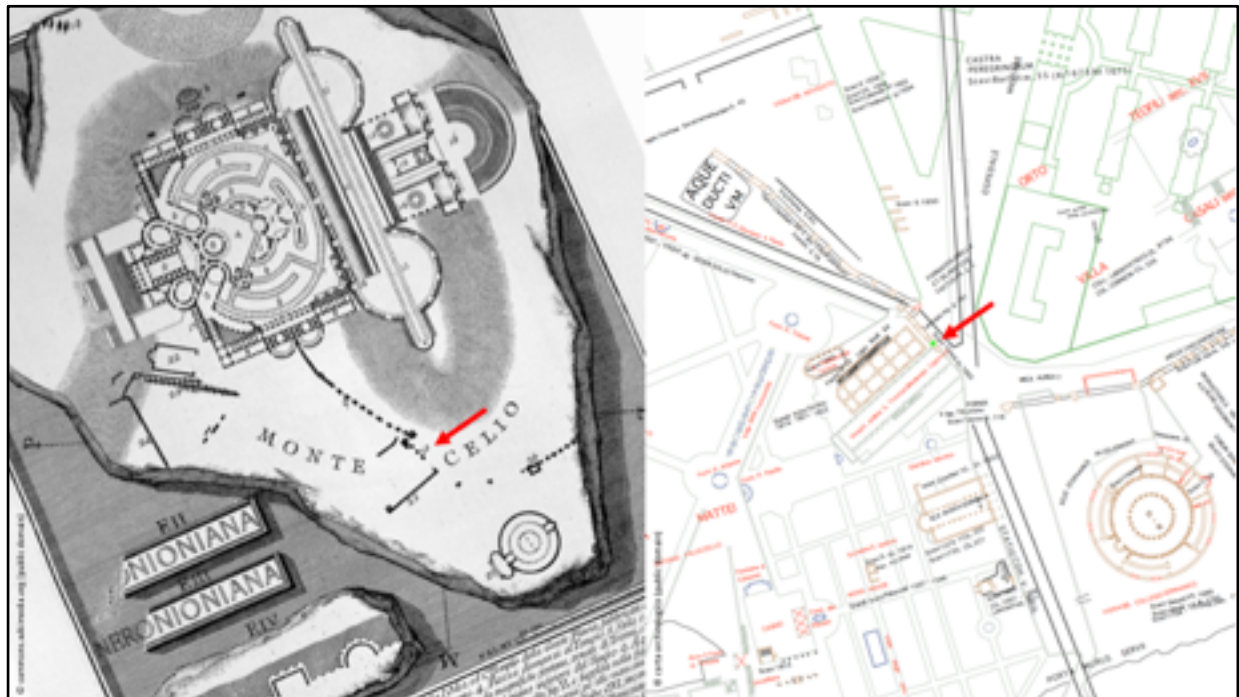




**Le Antichità Romane** is considered Piranesi's most scholarly and comprehensive work on Roman antiquities.

AND by cross referencing the Nolli Map, and Piranesi's 'ROMA' map with the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century archeological survey map Forma Urbis Romae by Rodolfo Lanciani and by using a satellite image app — I was able to pinpoint the location of ONIONIANA today

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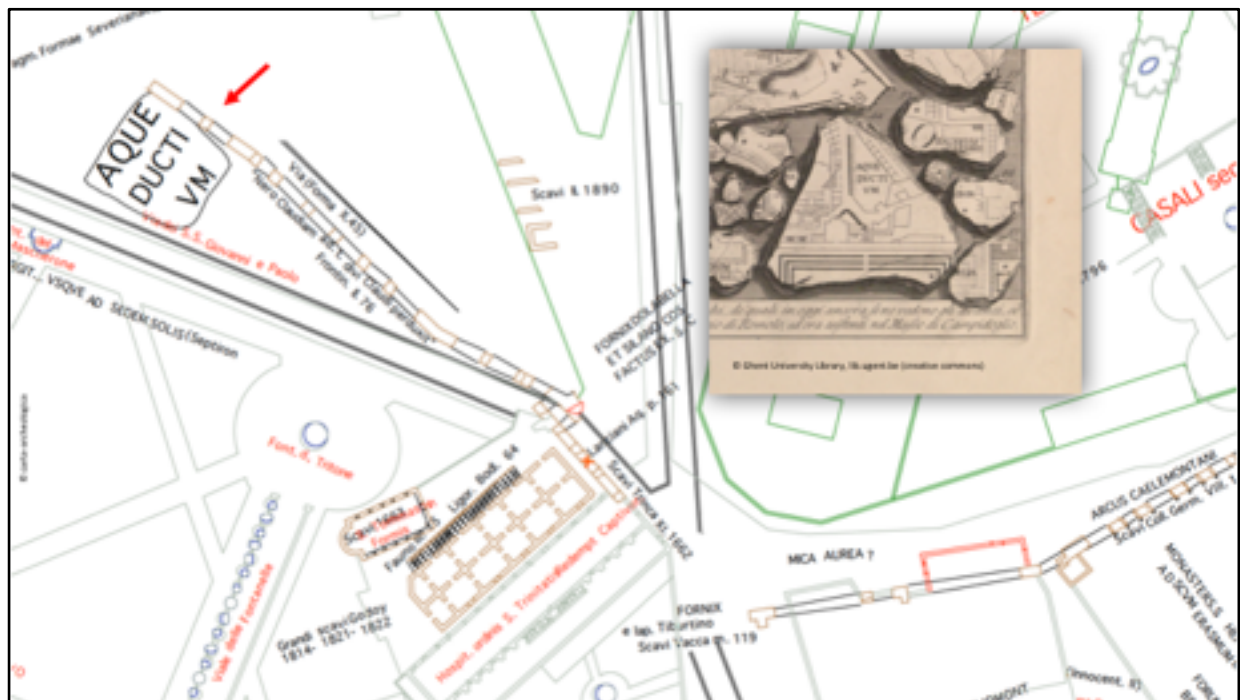


Our 'Site of the Sans' is seen south of the Colosseum, AND the the Temple of Claudius which represents the footprint of Piranesi's Ninfeo di Nero.

The position of Piranesi's annotation number 10 is north west of the San Stefano Rotondo AND just a few metres south-east of an arch gateway or 'Porta' into Rome called the Arco di Dolabella y Silano! (marked with a red arrow on the digitized carta-archeologica map which is generate from Lanciani's survey).

Could the ONIONIANA sans inscription STILL be THERE?

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The location structures form part of the AQUEDUCTIUM, Nero's aqueduct that joins the Claudian servicing water to the Domus area of Rome.

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If the ONIONIANA fragment was still *in situ*, surely there would be a record... an image online – but there is nothing.

The fragment therefore must be viewed today as, relatively insignificant. And is likely smaller scale than an monumental Inscription in marble or stone.

I thought that the ONIONIANA fragment could possibly be a Roman brick or tile stamp. Perhaps collected by Piranesi from the site indicated at number 10 on his Plan of the Nymphaeum of Nero.

OR **perhaps** they were still part of the brick archivolt structure?

→





Perhaps they were indeed representations of found bricks or tiles?

The Legions predominantly used lineal letterforms for their brick and tile stamps. Some are in the form of *tabula ansata* (as used on Soane's drawing)!

These forms represented and promoted the authority of Rome throughout their Empire.

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CIL XV 356 Bl Bianchi 2009.

EX-OFFIC  
NERONIAN



CIL XV 391/391 var.7 Forma: 110.

[...] = ONIANA  
(Possibly)  
PETRONIANA

© Institutum Romanum Finlandiae © 2017 Istitutum Romanum dell'Italia Centro-Occidentale

However, countless searches and studies of Roman Brickstamps proved unsuccessful. But these did throw up a couple of examples with partial letter sequences that matched to ONIONIANA.

But neither have the style of letterforms rendered by Piranesi!

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Being part of an aqueduct, perhaps ONIONIANA was more likely to be an engraving of a cast Roman lead pipe?

Such as this example, with its near monoline letterforms. Piranesi certainly represented clay and lead pipes with stamped and cast lettering, such as on his initial letter 'V' (above).

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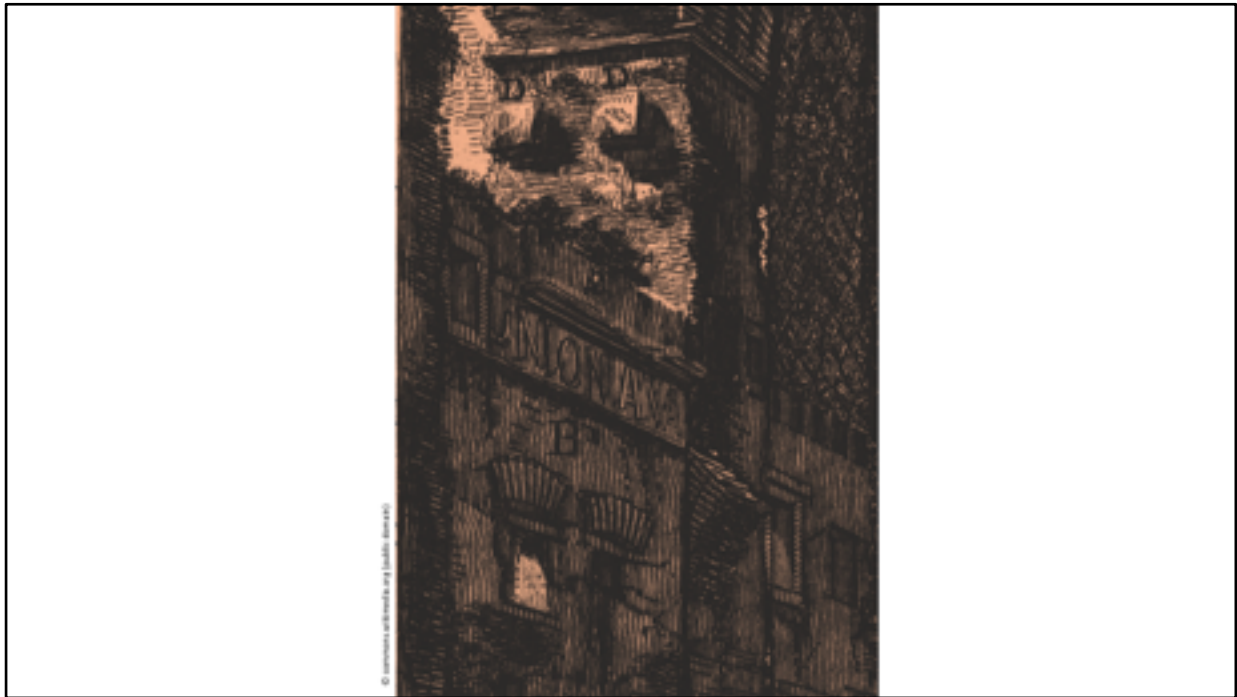


But eventually its context proved much easier to locate. **Le Antichita Romane** has an earlier plate TAV XXV (25) Fig. I. of the Arco di Dolabella y Silano in perspective. Where Piranesi carefully renders the ONIONIANA inscription on the wall of the archivolt of the aqueduct.

Can you spot it?

On Piranesi's perspective of the Arch of Dolabella: the inscription is annotated B. [the] *Remains of Nero's Inscription within his arches* (Avanzo della Iscrizione di Nerone ne' suoi archi).

→



A close-up of the archivolt and the ONIONIANA inscription reveals the situation of the inscription. A stone corniced brickwork tablet area with a later medieval window punch through on the left leaving a partial 'O'. The remainder of letters appear complete below a broken 'ogee' architrave pediment. The serif-less component letterforms appear to be standing proud (in-relief) casting shadows.

*So it exists...!*





But nothing is recorded in the CIL database?

The site of the Arch of Dolabella and Silano still stands in Rome today, but the area containing ONIONIANA drawn by Piranesi, has since collapsed, and latterly been renovated. John of Matha founded the Trinitarian Order in Rome in around 1207 at the Church of San Tommaso in Formis which is integrated into these archivolt — possibly occupied a cell above the arch. But little remains of the room today.

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If the ONIONIANA letters were in existence in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century surely other engravers would have recorded them?

Franzetti's plate No.66 published in 1795 as sets of four views of Rome engraved by Franc. Morelli, — shows the inscription.

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But Franzetti's work published in 1795, is principally a copy of Piranesi's Arch of Dolabella. With the close-up (right) showing the copied ONIONIANA inscription.

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And others after Piranesi such as Domenico Pronti's engraving of the Arch plate No.47 also of 1795 (top) are again smaller scale copies of Piranesi's original.

Pronti's retains only a suggestion of the ONIONIANA inscription (above right) indicating that the original reference to the inscription had by the end of the century, LOST its significance.

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If the ONIONIANA letters existed in Piranesi's time then they must be present immediately prior to the publication of *Antichita Romane* in 1756.

Giuseppe Vasi, who employed Piranesi as an apprentice from 1740 to around 1742. Generated a 'vedute' of the Arch of Dolabella, and San Tommaso in Formis and its surrounding architecture. —

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He provides us with an indication of the inscription on the gateway porta – a dedication to the Consuls Silano and Dolabella. But not the significantly larger letters of ONIONIANA?

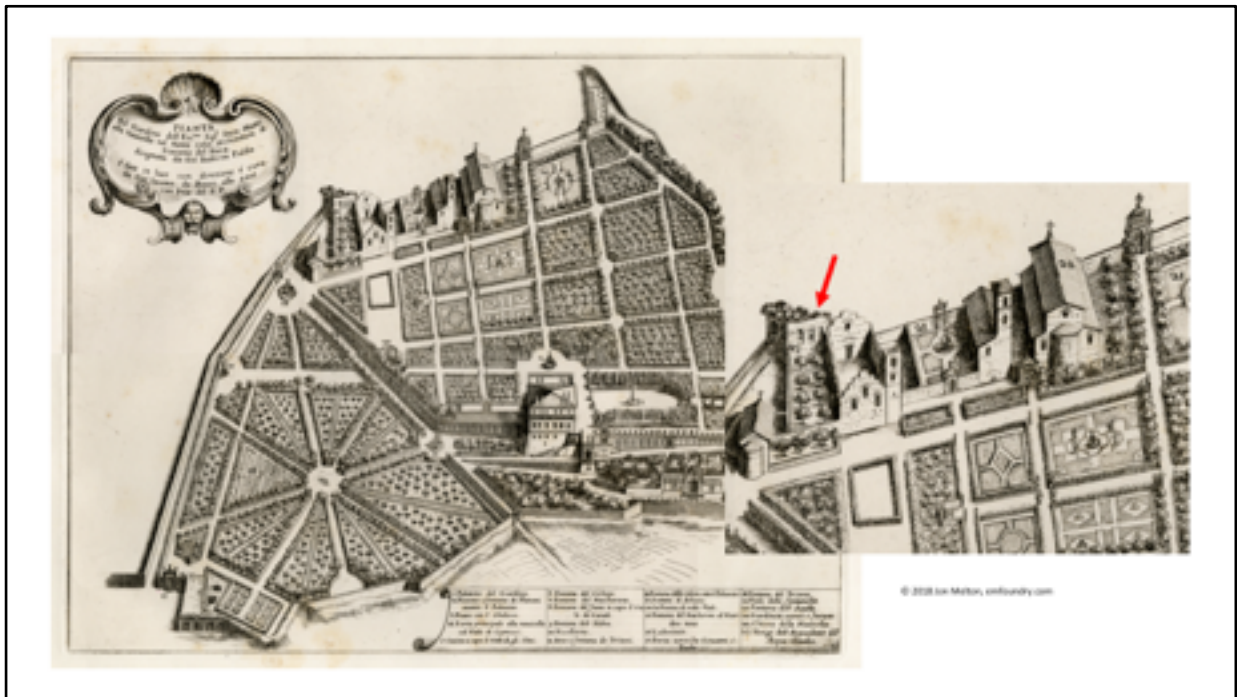
So where is it?

Although Piranesi is well known for his engraved 'capriccios' or fantastical architectural compositions. *Antichita Romane* is considered Piranesi's most detailed and exacting work regarding archaeological study and reconstructions of Roman buildings.

Perhaps he was referencing to an earlier record or engraving, well before the demise of the ONIONIANA inscription?

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Well, Giovanni Battista Falda's 1690 Map of the gardens of the Villa Mattei situated to the west, behind the Arch of Dolabella – shows the archivolt pertaining to Piranesi's ONINONIANA inscription as **intact**!

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Israel Silvestre's (in reverse) Arch of Dolabella engraving: 'Presso di San Stefano Rotondo' of 1640-53 shows us a double archway porta, and a rendered glimpse of where the ONIONIANA inscription may have been?

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Whilst Giovanni Battista Mercati's engravings of 1629, front and back of the arch of Dolabella, are again 'in reverse' but sadly from the wrong angle. The archivolt however, where the ONIONIANA letters are sited, appear intact and in reasonable condition...

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But if the ONIONIANA inscription had disappeared by the 1750s, and there is no conclusive evidence of an inscription existing on any engravings prior to Piranesi's Tav XXV Fig I. (**Plate.25 Fig.I above**).

What was Piranesi referencing? Perhaps it was pure invention along with his grand reconstruction of the plan of the Ninfeo of Nero, which today we understand as simply one of his grand architectural propositions.

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Eventually I found proof of existence...

Alo Giovannoli executed an engraving of the Arch of Dolabella sometime before 1616. It shows the roundel mosaic of John of Matha above the door to San Tommaso in Fornis. And it **includes** the inscription – which looks here more like **MONIANA**.

Much of Giovannoli's known work was published posthumously in 1619 in a book titled 'Roma Antica di Alo Giovannoli'. More significantly Giovannoli's engravings were being re-issued in the 1750s, and as a scholar of Rome, Piranesi would have almost certainly been aware of this fact.. A copy of the mid 18<sup>th</sup> Century re-release of Vedute degli Antichi Vestigi di Roma exists in the central bibiloteque in Zurich, and another in the British Library from the King George III collection recorded as of 1750 'question mark'.

Perhaps Giovannoli's flamboyance in representing an 'N' appears to have joined it to the 'I'. Or perhaps Piranesi corrupted this original to read ONIONIANA to suit his intension to generate evidence of a large Ninfeo complex built it the time of Nero.

But there is an more obvious problem — these letterforms are seriffed?

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But Giovannoli's scribe or burin engraved lettering remains identical throughout his work. There appears little or no attempt to render the style of the Roman inscriptional lettering he witnessed — only to capture the text.

So will we ever know what the ONIONIANA letterforms looked like?

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A clue perhaps? can be found in Antichita Romane on the chapter title page for the 'Explanation of the Aqueducts', which includes an engraved initial 'N' formed by what can only be described as stone (or possibly brick tile) slabs forming a capital 'N'.

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This 'worm-eye' perspective viewpoint includes an aqueduct and archivolt in the background. Beside the N is a partial letter 'O' — both are brick-filled but sit proud of the infill material. The engraving explains the construction of ONIANIANA in Piranesi's perspective of the Arch of Dolabella.

We can even see, when the engraving is reversed, features the Arch of Dolabella which clearly informs the landscape setting of Piranesi's initial 'N'.

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These are clearly two letters from Piranesi's perspective Tav. XXV Fig.I (**Plate.25**), which he obviously wanted to stress to the reader at the head of his chapter on Roman Aqueducts!

When flipped the initial 'N' and partial 'O' becomes a representation of the first two letters with the ONIONIANA fragment depicted in Tav.XLI (**Plate.41**).

Piranesi is obviously keen to strengthen his argument for the existence of the serif-less letterforms of Nero!

→





Well, Soane met Piranesi when he arrived in Rome in summer 1778, shortly before Piranesi's death in November that year. Upon which Piranesi gave the young architect four engravings of his work from *Vedute di Roma*, originally published in 1748.

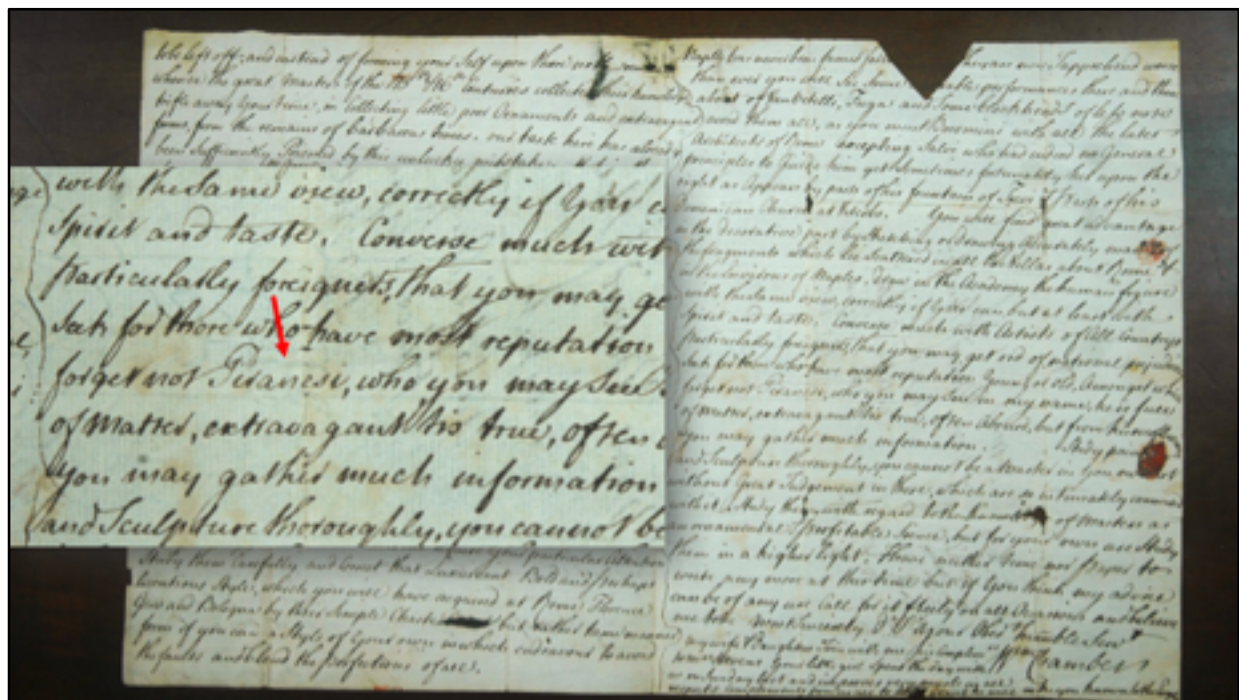
43



Soan[e] was given a 'letter of introduction' by Sir William Chambers (the Architect and Treasurer of the Royal Academy) after he won his scholarship to go to Rome.

Chambers had originally sent this letter to another young architect; Edward Stevens in August 1774 who tragically died in 1775. But felt he needed to pass the letter onto Soane.

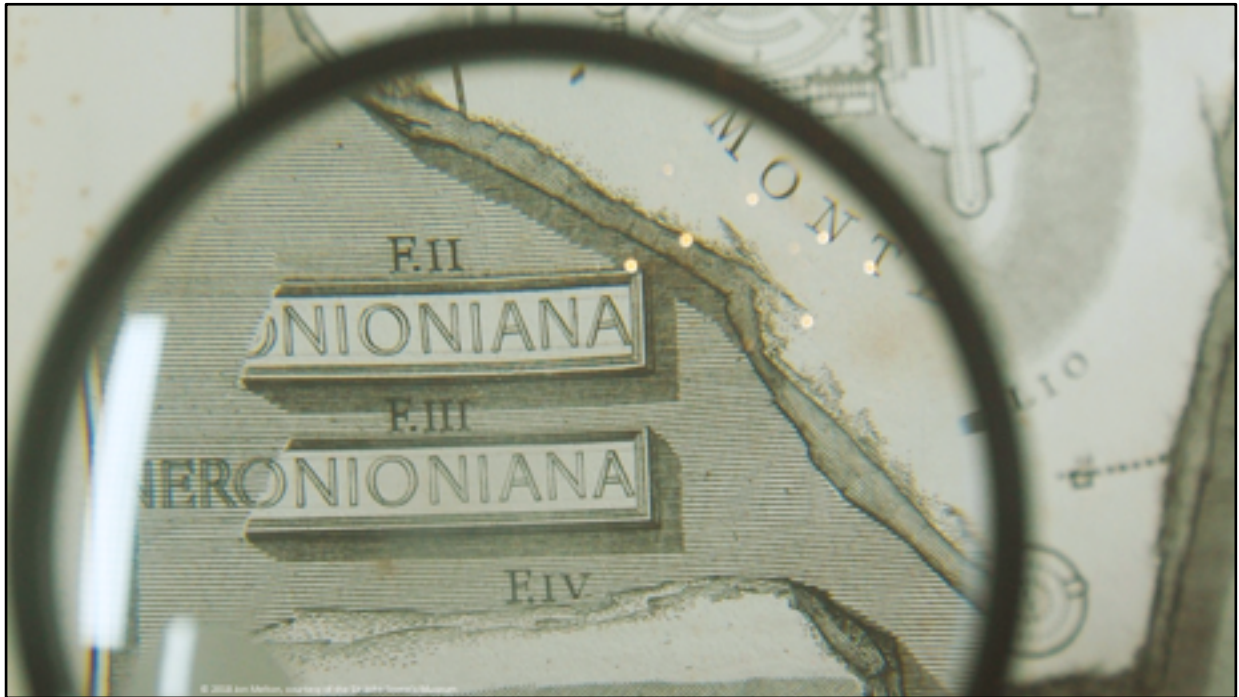
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This letter contained a number of recommendations on how to make productive use of your time in Italy, and who meet concerning the practice of architecture.

The name 'Piranesi' is most carefully penned, and cited as a principal contact for Edward (and therefor Soane) to meet, as an eccentric, but primary authority on Roman architecture and its antiquities.

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Soane's owned a copy of *Antichita Romane*, seen here with Tav.XLI (**Pate.41**) under a magnified.

Soane's edition was from 1776, titled as '*Opera de Piranesi*'. The book and plates are confirmed as being the 'first printing' of 1776 as later runs included Tom.I. (Volume 1) at the top left on each plate from 1778-9 onwards.

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But something strikes you immediately... the ONIONIANA page is worn-thin, stained and curved at the margin where you naturally hold the book to view Ninfeo di Nerone.

This is by far the most patinated and extensively handled engraving in the whole of Soane's copy of *Le Antichita Romane*.

The second most worn is another plan of Roman Baths, but this page doesn't show nearly as much patination. The rest of the book pages show consistently lighter wear and handling.

→



The edges are severely stained where one holds the page of Tav.XLI (**Plate.41**), reflecting countless engaged forefingers and thumbs of readers.

Indeed, George Bailey, Soane's pupil and the first Soane Museum curator from 1837, commented at the front of the book about its heavily foxed condition.

We don't know when Soane acquired his copy of *Antichita Romane* but the plan of the *Ninphaeum of Nero* was by far the most studied.

Studied by countless improvers, apprentices and assistant architects to Soane before his death in 1837.

This was a MOST important engraving? And the significant difference it possesses is the Serif-less Letterforms!

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We may never know if the Inscription ever existed in the form Piranesi drew it. But it was obviously there at some point in history as recorded by Alo Giovannoli.

Piranesi may have been referencing Giovannoli's engraving – and it seems that it was republished in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century while Piranesi was generating engravings for *Le Antichità Romane*.

Or perhaps fragments were retained by the Order of the Trinitarian Monks, or were being utilised as salvaged rebuilding materials for reservations to the Pilgrims Hospice known as S Tommaso in Fornis?

→



The annotated number 10. at 'the site of the Sans' inscription is adjacent to the THIRD aqueduct archivolt down from the Arco di Dolabella. Which seems strange as it is rendered in Piranesi's Perspective: Tav XXV Fig.I. **(Plate.45)** as being in situ on the brickwork beneath the second arch span?

An error? Piranesi attention to detail, is legendary. He doesn't make simple mistakes. Does this mean remnants of the inscription were found or unearthed beside the third archicvlt? Do the Trinitarian monks of San Tomasso have the ONIONIANA inscription as fragments...

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Perhaps the fragments are still there?

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THE EVIDENCE is mounting up.

Piranesi certainly proposed a radical Letterform in an inscription that represented the authority of Roman Architecture through their achievements as aqueduct engineers supplying the life force of water to their capital.

This classically referenced serif-less titling on Plate 41 is certainly amongst the first if not the first deliberate *sans serif*...

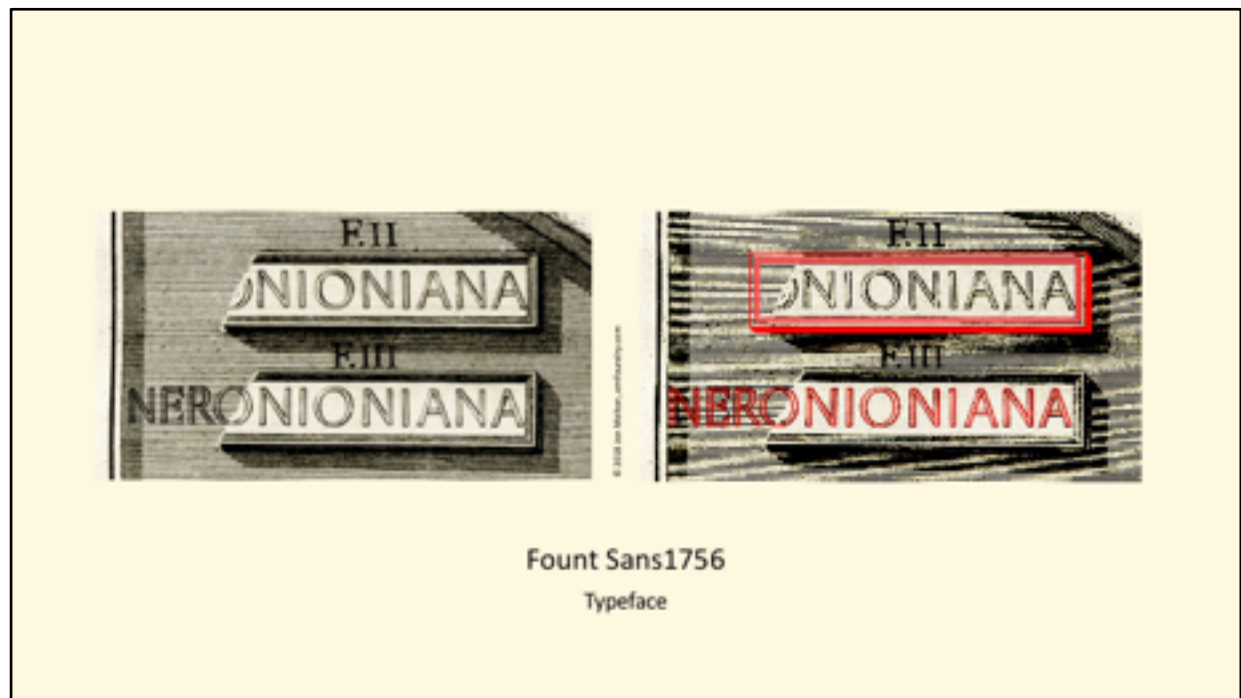
...that leads the way forwards to the first sans metal types of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and ultimately the dominance of commercial sans throughout the 20<sup>th</sup>.

BUT WHO was the Italian draftsman that drew Soane's title blocks?

WELL THAT'S PART TWO of this presentation – which we don't have ANY time for today!

But I'd like to show how this research is informing my type design.

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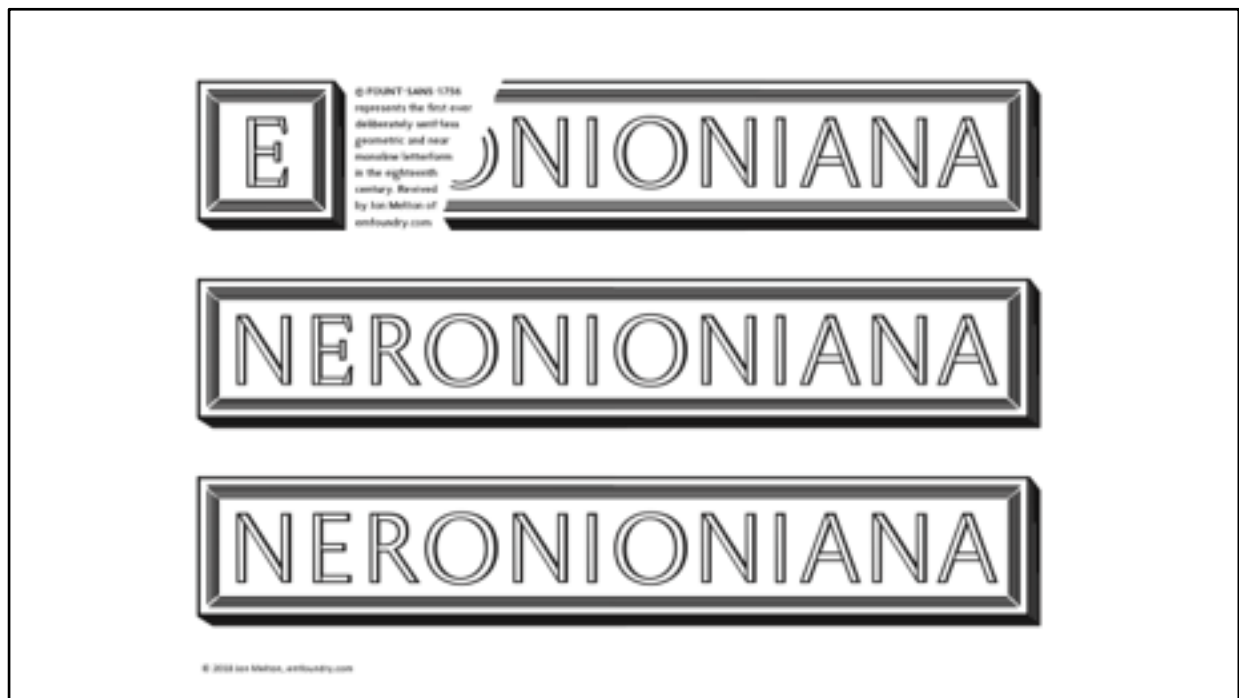
Fount Sans1756 (-only a working title) and very much still in development.

But I noticed the deliberately serified 'E'. On Piranesi's engraving, Why? Piranesi was more than adept at rendering this character to stand out, without needing the serifs whilst maintaining the horizontal lines of tonal shading.

No this letter is referencing the greco-roman Architectural debate of the time. The authority of Roman Architecture was being challenged as taking all it knew from Greeks. And this didn't sit comfortably with Piranesi.

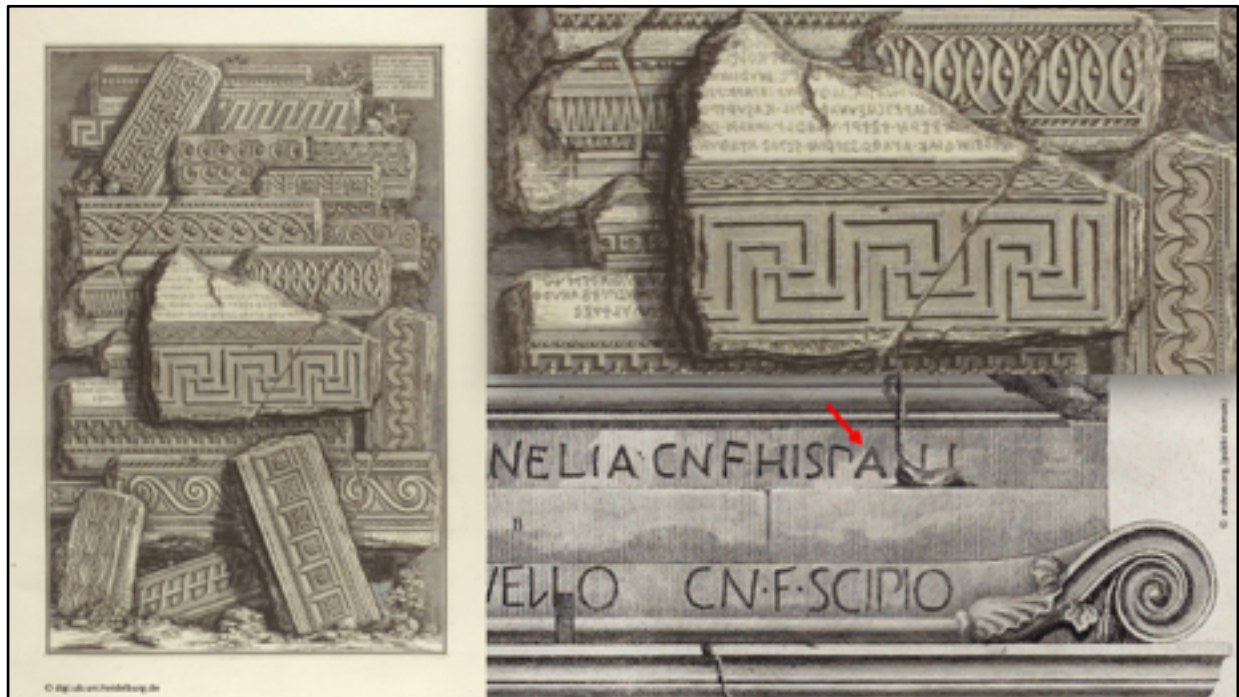
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But it does provides opportunities for some extensive sets of Tablet Initials. With and without component serifs...

→



Piranesi's Etruscan fragment plates shown in his publication titled '*Observations*'\* of 1765 — Piranesi's forceful argument FOR the superiority of the Roman and therefore his own architecture.

He directs our attention to the ornament and serif-less letters of Etruscan inscription as the precursor to that of Rome...

**Piranesi recognises a natural progression from the early Roman lineal inscriptional forms towards the refinement of serifs. Notice the carefully engraved outline 'A' by Francesco Piranesi?**

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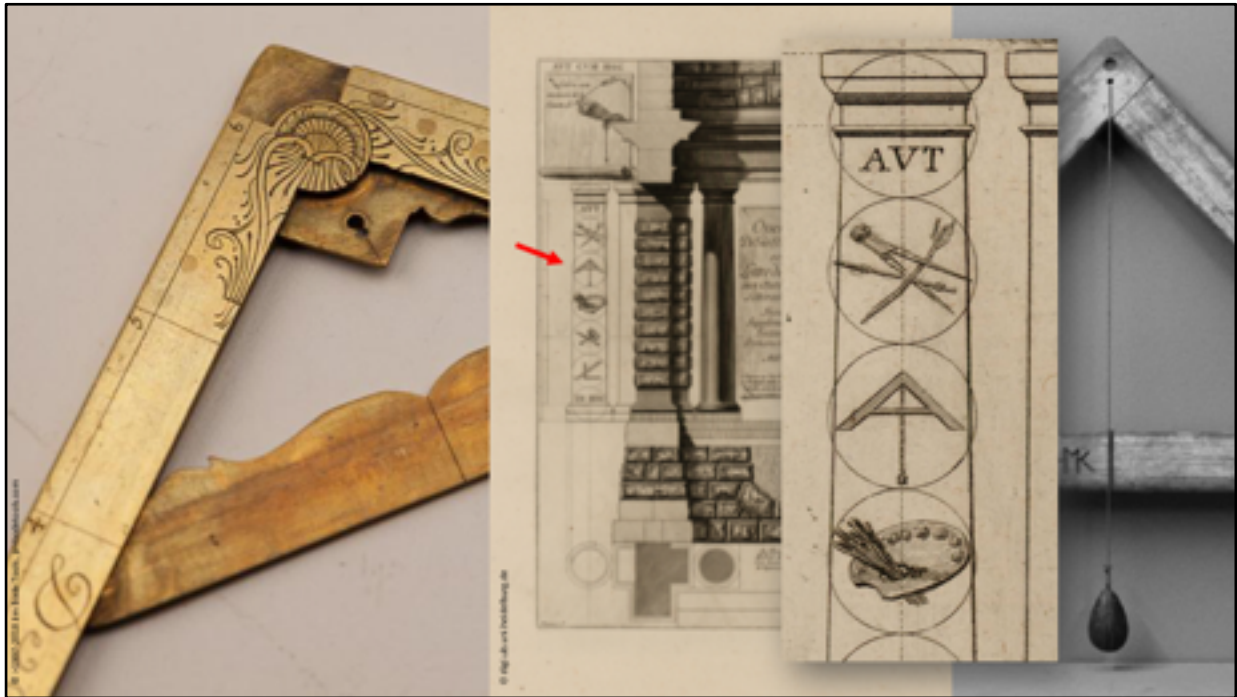
\*(Osservazioni Di Gio. Battista Piranesi sopra la Lettre de M. Mariette aux auteurs de la Gazette Littéraire de l'Europe)



By highlighting the 'E' is Piranesi suggesting that the Romans added serifs to the lineal Etrurian characters? THUS dispensing the argument for the direct influence of the Greeks and their alphabet?

When you are reviving type you are struck by such idiosyncratic features. Notice also, the wider stroke crossbars of the two 'A's. Most deliberate and prominent. ?

→



These 'A's are reminiscent of the Masons Plumb Square... which Piranesi includes on his title page of 'Observations' of 1765.

Piranesi places it second in the hierarchy of the important professions with it representing ENGINEERING. The masons square shows us when a structure is 'TRUE' (perfectly vertical)

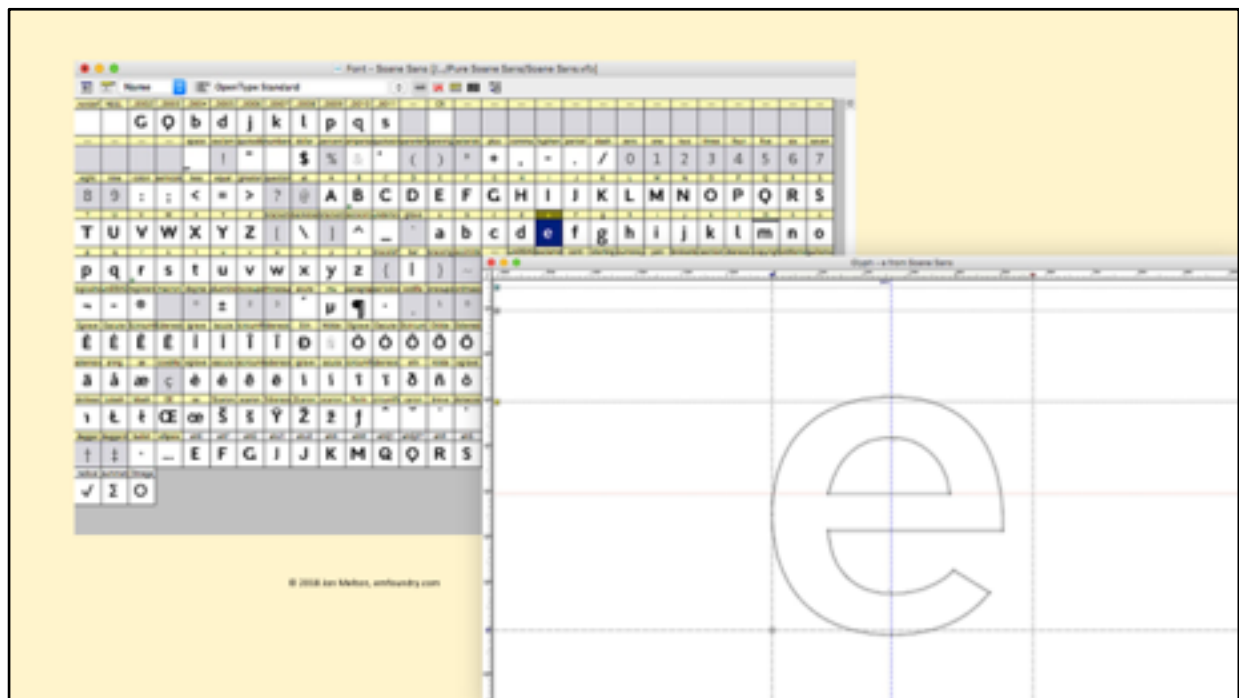
and here with an enhanced vertical line — likely acts as a metaphor for Piranesi's and the truth of his Ideology.

→



According to Piranesi: ONIONIANA is therefor the TRUE form of letter, evolved from the Etruscan – the primal, the PRIMATIVE ROMAN.

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The NERONIANIANA Initials will allow me to progress Soane Sans towards a more scholarly fount that is wholly representative of the earliest 18<sup>th</sup> Century Sans serif typeface.

THANK YOU for LISTENING.







Research paper: The true source of the sans  
Seeking publication...

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...[pause, and leave up]