

S.P.Q.R. Underfoot.

A mark that remained operational, and why brands now need constitutions, not campaigns.

THOMAS MARZANO · AN ESSAY · JANUARY 2026



ROME · AUGUST 2025

It was August 2025. Rome was already at 37°C before the day had properly begun.

I had been walking through the market in Trastevere for about an hour. Heat rising off cobblestones. Voices folding into each other. The city doing what it always does: moving fast, layered, indifferent to comfort.

Rome is unusual in one specific way. Time does not replace itself here. It accumulates.

Ancient stone beside baroque ornament beside modern traffic. Century over century, building on top of what came before. You can see the past without having to imagine it.

I crossed the bridge from Trastevere and stopped, briefly, without ceremony, standing on a manhole. Cast iron. Municipal infrastructure. The kind of object you never notice unless it fails.

Stamped into it: S.P.Q.R.

At the time, I was already deep in thinking about what happens to branding when AI becomes the mediator of choice.

I've known what SPQR means since childhood. I'm Italian. Even after living outside Italy for decades, that part doesn't become abstract. It stays embodied. Cultural memory is not a Wikipedia entry. It is a reflex.

But seeing SPQR there, on a modern manhole, did something I didn't expect.

Because I had spent the hours before seeing it in the places everyone sees it: marble plaques, stone inscriptions, buildings that predate most of what we call "modern." Two thousand years of material continuity.

And then the same mark was underfoot, in cast iron, in the present tense.

That was the moment it clicked.

This is not a symbol that survived as nostalgia. This is a mark that remained operational.

And it hit me with a kind of quiet force: this might be among the most enduring identity marks still being used as a living civic signature today, not as a museum object, but as infrastructure.

Not on the walls. Underfoot.



TEATRO DI MARCELLO, ROME

01

A Mark Anchored in a Relationship.

SPQR is shorthand for *Senatus Populusque Romanus*, the Senate and the Roman People.

That matters, because it tells you what the mark is anchored to. Not to a ruler. Not to a dynasty. Not to a charismatic figure. Not even to a single political configuration.

It is anchored to a relationship: institution and people. Governance and populace. Authority and belonging. In one compressed acronym, SPQR encodes a legitimacy claim: this city is not merely administered. It is shared.

This is not admiration for empire. It is an observation about what happens when a civic identity contract is made legible enough to persist across reinvention.

A worldview is embedded in that structure. Rome wasn't only roads and aqueducts and law. It was an identity people could inhabit. An idea of citizenship, of order, of continuity, of what it meant to belong to something larger than the individual.

SPQR is the condensation of that idea. And once you see it this way, a second truth becomes hard to ignore: SPQR became bigger than the entity that created it.

Empires collapse. Regimes change. Cities get rebuilt. The surface layer of power is unstable. But a relationship that is made sacred enough can persist longer than the people managing it.

02

Why the Manhole Matters.

Brand leaders often talk about "consistency" as a communications discipline. Website, packaging, campaigns, social, tone of voice, distinct assets. Rome treats continuity differently.

SPQR is not placed where it looks impressive. It's embedded in the parts of the city that continue to function regardless of who is in charge: civic property, utilities, municipal surfaces. That detail isn't poetic. It's structural.

A manhole is not a communications channel. It is an operating channel. And the implication is simple: A brand endures when it's not merely expressed. It endures when it's embedded into the system that keeps running.

That is why the contrast between marble and cast iron matters. Marble is memory. Cast iron is maintenance. When the same identity mark exists in both, you are looking at something more than design.

You’re looking at governance made visible.



03

The 30-Year Detour.

For the last 20–30 years, digital marketing has trained organisations to value what can be measured quarter by quarter. Performance marketing didn’t just become a channel. It became a governance model: what you can attribute gets funded, what you can’t gets treated as optional.

Brand didn’t disappear. It got reduced, often unintentionally, into surface: visual identity, campaign platforms, content systems, “distinctiveness,” short-cycle relevance.

Not because leaders lost intelligence. Because the operating incentives rewarded short-cycle proof.

Brand equity is real, but it is stubbornly hard to measure in neat quarterly increments. So branding got demoted, not always openly, but structurally. It became something you “do” alongside the business, not something that governs how the business behaves.

And then AI entered the picture in a way that forces the question back to first principles.

04

The Mediation Layer Just Changed.

When an AI agent becomes the mediator between a person and the market, the mechanics that powered the last three decades of digital playbooks begin to collapse.

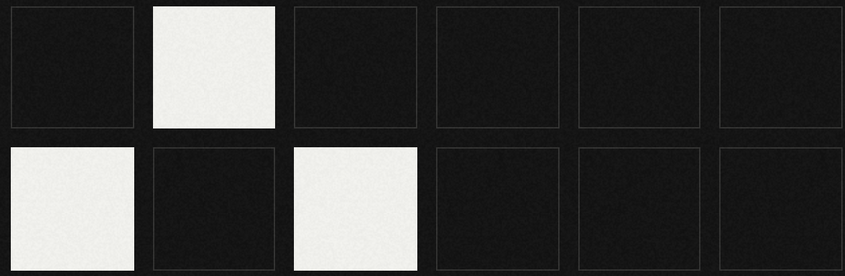
A lot of performance marketing depends on a specific mediation model:

- → the human searches
- → the human scans results
- → the human compares
- → the human clicks
- → the human gets retargeted
- → the human is nudged down a funnel

An agent doesn't behave like that.

It compresses discovery. It abstracts interfaces. It reduces the visible surface of persuasion. It makes many of the levers we've optimised, attention capture, repeated exposure, funnel architecture, less decisive.

Ask an agent for "a stable running shoe for a first marathon, under a set budget, delivered by Friday," and you don't get a market. You get a shortlist.



Three options appear. Everything else becomes invisible. Not rejected. Never surfaced.

When the mediation layer changes, “performance” starts to collapse into a narrower function. Optimisation still matters, but it stops being strategy. It becomes hygiene.

And when that happens, advantage moves away from tactics and back to something older and deeper: meaning, the reason a choice is made when functionality is comparable.

This brought me back to fundamentals I’ve always believed. But now with urgency:

Brands that endure in the age of AI won’t be the brands with better campaigns.

They’ll be the brands that encode a deeper layer of human meaning, clear enough to survive interface change, governance change, leadership change.

And that morning in Rome, SPQR wasn’t “inspiring.” It was clarifying.

05

The Hijack Test.

Every powerful symbol gets used by actors who want its legitimacy without living its obligations. SPQR has been appropriated across history. Later regimes tried to borrow Rome’s symbolic authority by borrowing its marks.

That is not a moral statement. It’s structural. When a symbol carries legitimacy, someone will attempt to wear it.

The question is not whether appropriation happens. The question is whether the meaning has enough internal gravity, enough governance, to resist drift.

A mark survives hijack attempts when its legitimacy is anchored deeper than the people trying to exploit it.

Not in the ruler. In the contract the mark represents.

That is what SPQR taught me in a way books and frameworks hadn’t: a symbol can be carried by the wrong hands and still remain itself, if its legitimacy is owned by something broader than the hands carrying it.

06

The Problem Modern Brands Don’t Like to Name.

A brand without decision rights is not a brand. It is a costume.

Most organisations still treat brand as an effects layer: a system for messaging, aesthetics, campaign coherence. Even strong brand strategies often remain descriptive. They explain what the brand says, not what the brand constrains.

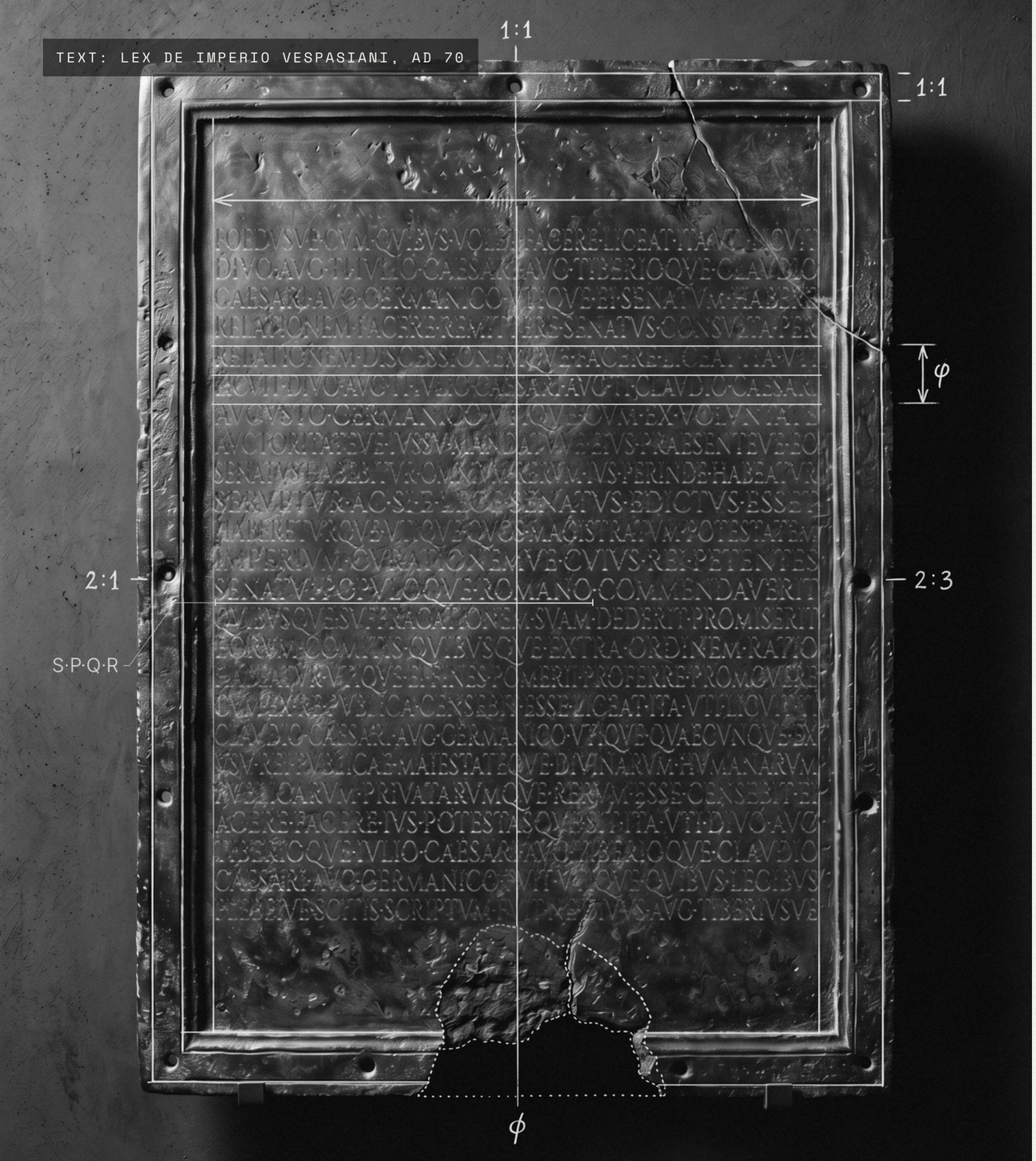
But the moment you enter an AI-mediated market, this becomes a survival issue.

Because if your brand exists mainly as tacit knowledge inside a few people, taste inside a creative team, intuition inside a senior leader, then it becomes fragile the moment:

- → leadership changes
- → the organisation scales
- → the market gets mediated by systems that infer rather than feel

In that environment, brands that cannot be governed will be diluted by default. Not dramatically. Not with a scandal. Quietly.

> **They become interchangeable.**



07

The Bridge to Brand Constitutions.

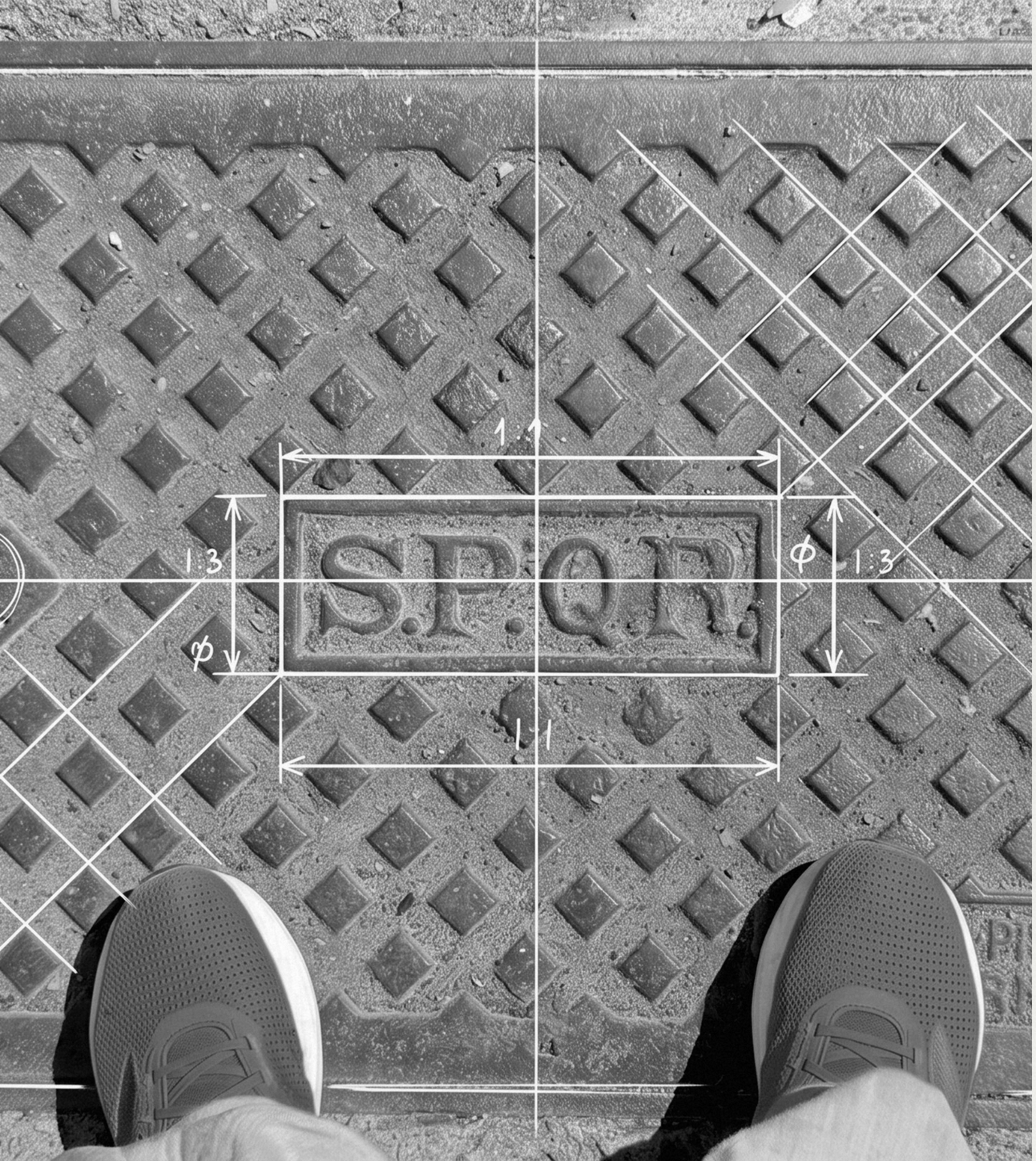
That morning didn’t give me a nice metaphor. It gave me a governance requirement.

If SPQR is still alive, it is not because Rome kept “telling its story.” It’s because the mark compresses an identity contract that kept being embedded into the city’s operating surfaces, across centuries, across political shifts, across reinventions.

That was the clarity I needed.

And it’s what allowed me to finish and proceed with the idea that became Brand Constitutions.

When I came back to my Airbnb, the first thing I did was share the SPQR insight with Flavia Barbat (Editor in chief of Brandingmag). We had already been shaping my thinking into the manifesto (*Brand Constitutions: The Legible-Lovable Standard for Building Equity in an Agentic Economy*). SPQR didn’t add decoration. It added a hard reference point: what endures is what is encoded as a contract, not what is produced as a campaign.



08

The Constitutional Layer.

Modern brands avoid the constitutional layer because it forces a harder definition of brand: not expression, but decision rights.

So the question becomes austere: what must remain non-delegable, even as execution becomes automated. What must be explicit in the relationship, on both sides, so belonging isn’t just sentiment. And what must hold under pressure, in incentives, trade-offs, partnerships, and hiring, so the worldview is real rather than decorative.

> **That is where Brand Constitutions begin: codified, machine-readable yet human-lovable systems that define what a brand is, how it decides, how it behaves, and what it must never become, built for legibility, governance, and endurance when the interface collapses and mediation shifts.**

09

A Question for Monday Morning.

This is the question I’d leave with any CMO or brand leader who still thinks brand is primarily a comms discipline: If you did nothing for the next ten years, no reinvention, no “rebrand,” no fresh narrative, what would your brand be remembered for?

Strip away products. Strip away quarterly performance. Strip away the current leadership team. What remains?

Would anyone miss you if you disappeared, because something meaningful would actually be gone?

If the answer is vague, the problem isn’t creative. It’s constitutional.

10

Leaving the Bridge.

I left that bridge and kept walking into the heat. Rome didn’t change. The noise didn’t change. The city kept layering itself in front of me like it always has. What changed was not my belief that brands should be institutionalised. I’ve believed that for a long time.

What changed was the clarity of why it becomes non-negotiable now.

SPQR wasn’t a romantic symbol in that moment. It was a reminder of what survives when the world reorganises itself: not channels, not optimisation loops, not the playbooks we’ve built around attention and attribution, but a shared identity and worldview, compressed into something simple enough to carry across centuries.

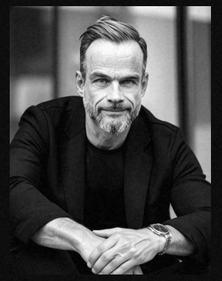
That is what the last 30 years of digital marketing quietly trained many organisations to neglect. And that is what an AI-mediated market will punish.



If you're navigating this shift, the question isn't what to optimise. It's what to codify.

If you want help with that, you know where to find me.

THE AUTHOR



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Thomas Marzano is a strategist, designer and systems thinker. He spent close to thirty years inside Philips and ASML, where the difference between a real brand and a well-dressed one becomes visible under pressure. Today, through Marzano Consulting, he helps CMOs and boards build brands that agents can read and people can love.

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