

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

## LATIN SCRIPT

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**Overview** The development of written languages, and of the scripts in which they are written, follows the development of power centers: the great powers impose their ways of writing, as they impose their might. Naturally, though, the scripts employed, in this development, have the dual role of representing the power of their speakers, but also of representing the sounds of the languages of those speakers. The adjustment of written scripts to the sounds they represent is infinitely detailed, for as times and empires expand, there is increasing slippage between pronunciation and written symbol--as the way you pronounce a language changes, the adequacy of the symbols for this pronunciation is likely to diminish. Which is why 'spellings' must over time be changed, to meet the new sounds of a given language, and why the history of scripts, like the Latin script, must evolve. A look at the forms of Latin script, from its origins as a derivative from the Cumean version of the Greek alphabet, through the stable and stately forms we find it adopting, to render the fine tuned language of Silver Latin, will indicate how rapidly written Latin was evolving during the period of a few centuries.

**Internal development of the Latin alphabet** In its nascent form the Latin alphabet derived from the version of the Greek alphabet called Cumaeian (6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. E.). This adaptation from Greek was enriched as the sway of power relations, between the two nations, gradually reversed; after the Roman defeat of Greek forces in the first century B.C.E. the Latin alphabet, the repertoire of Latin symbols, was enriched, the Latin C replacing the Greek G (gamma), and the letters Y and Z being added to the Latin, bringing it to its classical form of 23 letters. (This kind of alphabetical change, of course, does not occur overnight, but reflects gradual changes on the ground, both in pronunciation and in conveniences of orthography--for we are not talking printing here, but time consuming inscribing. We are getting close to the nitty gritty of how language change relates to alphabetical change.)

**Changes in the outreach of the Latin alphabet** In its long march toward the stable schoolbook form it occupies today, the Latin alphabet has endured numerous additions and modifications. In the seventh century C.E. Latin adopted the letter W to accommodate the double V sound; in the seventeenth century.C.E., Latin adopted a letter for the J sound. In the broad course of its passage, through lands known and unknown to the Romans, Latin proved able to modify, change, and make its own the scripts of various other nation states. During the Middle Ages, with the spread of Christianity, the Latin alphabet replaced the Ogham scripts common in North Europe; the alphabets in use for Finnish, Hungarian, and Estonian were homogenized into the standard spelling of the Latin alphabet; after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in our time, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan adopted the Latin alphabet. In other words, the Latin alphabet has grown at a fairly voracious pace, normalizing itself and bending others to its norms. Despite that voracity, it is worth noting that as late as 1500 C.E. the spread of the Latin script was limited to areas of West, North, and Central Europe, while a quick survey, of a current language map of the world, will show the globe fairly equally divided between Chinese and Arabic alphabet users, on one hand, and Latin alphabet based users on the other.

**Script as portal into history and marker into the world** Learning our abc's, if that is our fate, and not the Arabic alphabet or the non-alphabetic writing system of Chinese, means standing inside a signifying system which has been millennia in the making for us. So deeply are our writing and speech habits embedded in the first openings of our consciousness, as we occupy our private worlds, it is difficult to unpackage the historical framework in which we are shaping ourselves as we breathe life into our alphabets. To realize the historical condition that brings us to our writing act, is at the same time to realize it when we have come against another historical writing tradition. This would be the occasion on which, familiarly comfortable inside my Latin alphabet, I discover that I have flown into Kyrillic territory, and am reading my signs in Russian. Another example might pose the irony more clearly. Travel to Greece, and enjoy the full irony of this historical setting: we move with our Latin alphabet into a speech world in which naming references are carried out in symbols which were the forerunners of the Latin alphabet itself. It is as though we were moving backward into alphabetical time, to a point at which our own alphabet had not yet been invented.

**Reading**

Haarman, Harald, *Geschichte der Schrift, (History of Writing)*, Munich, 2004.

Morison, Stanley, *Politics and Script: Aspects of Authority and Freedom in the development of Greco-Latin script from the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. to the twentieth century A.D.*, Oxford, 1972.

**Discussion questions**

What is the effect of introducing writing into a culture that is fundamentally oral, as was Roman culture before its contact with Greece impacted it? Is it 'good' for a culture to be able to write?

Who determines what changes are needed in a script, in order to bring it to a par with the spoken practice of its time?

To what extent is the power and influence of a writing system a reflection of the political/economic power behind it?