HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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WESTERN EUROPEAN CULTURE – Scripts

Contents

ANCIENT PERIOD

Scripts.   The primary scripts of Western Europe, in post classical times, have been the Latin and the Cyrillic scripts, frequently called alphabets. The Cyrillic script, which currently is used for a wide spread of languages in Eurasia, is the national script for various Slavic, Turkic, and Persian nations in Eastern Europe, and enjoys its own antiquity, having been founded by Saints Cyril and Methodius (9th century A.D.) and at that time made the official script of the Bulgarian Empire. The Cyrillic script was named the third official script of the European Union—in addition to Latin and Greek—with the accession of Bulgaria to the Union, in 2007. Thus, while not exactly part of the Ur-alphabetic foundation of Western European scripts, Cyrillic deserves mention, before we pass to Latin, the chief script of Western Europe.

Shaw.   The Latin script, which English speakers commonly call 'the alphabet,' is a writing system based on the letters of the ancient Roman alphabet, and though this script has evolved in many details—of added or subtracted or modified letters; of 'hands' or writing styles—it has nonetheless remained remarkably stable for over two millennia. (Does that mean that the script has functioned effectively, with a lot of nursing and caressing here and there, or does it mean that the script is partly a fossil?) The playwright Bernard Shaw, who created his own phonetic alphabet for English, felt that the Latin alphabet was so seriously unable to deal with the sounds of English, and thus so baffling in its spelling, that it needed replacement by a phonetically effective alphabet, the one he proposed.

Origins.   The Latin alphabet was itself derived from a form of Cumaean Greek (itself derived from Phoenician)—from the early Greek settlements along the Italian coast—in use by the Etruscan peoples who were the neighbors to the ancient Romans. (The usage origin for the Latin alphabet was thus the seventh century B.C.) In its earliest form— like the Duenos inscription from the Quirinal Hill in Rome, which adorns the flanks of a three-part perfume bottle— the Latin alphabet was an uppercase (all caps) serified set of letters. As it was adopted (and adapted) for use by the Romans themselves, the Romans were naturally inclined to explain this important step in their cultural development, and did not fail to ascribe more than human interventions to the invention of their alphabet, allowing their first century B.C. writer and fabulist, Hyginus, to postulate divine intervention and observations of the flights of cranes, as the triggers to the creation of the Latin alphabet.

POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

Alphabet.   The Latin alphabet contained 23 letters, in the form in which it diffused out into the postclassical, and soon mediaeval, European world. As it so diffused, of course, it provided for a rapid increase in the number of users of the Latin alphabet, for example among many former Greek speakers, who were to undergo now this subtle undermining of Hellenism by the Roman spirit. Among the essential enrichments of the new alphabet, of course, was the growing use of it in cursive or handwriting form, the inevitable usage element in a culture coming to rely increasingly on the message, document, the memoir—all those appurtenances of a newly complex administrative world like that of the Carolingian Renaissance, in the eighth century. In the post classical centuries preceding Charlemagne, and devoted

characteristically to prayer and the preservation of ancient texts, the chief modifications of alphabet were those introduced by the handwriting process. It is to be added that the letter forms familiar to us today, in the Latin alphabet we use—as on the screen before you—are close to the forms being worked out in handwriting in the early postclassical years. A touching instance is that the Latin script written by Roman soldiers on Hadrian's Wall, in 100 A.D., is very close to the orthography of the Latin alphabet taught in Western European languages in the twentieth century.

Monasteries. The Christian monks who took it upon themselves to save the texts of classical literature, and especially of the Church Fathers, copied their material onto codices whose material was parchment, and they did so, in the vast monasteries like the Benedict of Monte Cassino, more or less in the Latin alphabet of the Roman Empire—but with many local variations. Italian manuscripts of the seventh and eighth centuries are likely to be written entirely in capital letters, and to assume a formal and aesthetic look, while the manuscripts of contemporary Irish monks are far more workaday, like the hand of Roman soldiers at Hadrian's Wall. Those same Irish monks, however, appear to have been the innovators of the capital letter which begins the sentence, and does even more, by introducing the concept of 'lower case' into European spelling.

Alcuin. From the time of Charlemagne date many of the defining traits of the written Latin alphabet, for in the court at Aachen there was a palace workshop at which many experts in hand-writing exercised their skills. The imported British scholar, Alcuin, performed miracles of direction, leading talented scribes into one book preservation project after another. The turnout from these projects was a large manuscript repository, in a monastery near Tours—of which Alcuin became abbot—of many of the finest examples of mediaeval manuscript illumination.

Ogam. That we not oversimplify, in this rapid survey of script creation for the Latin alphabet, we must at least mention two other versions of Western European alphabet, whose limited period of effect falls within the Postclassical period. *Runic alphabets*, found on stones, trees, or other natural sources, appear to have been used to record documents of Old Irish, and as such were commonly inscribed throughout Ireland and Wales, throughout the postclassical period, at least until the early twelfth century. The *ogham* alphabet, in use from the fourth to the ninth centuries, was a vehicle for writing Irish; it appears, as well as on other venues, on massive stone glyphs found in Wales and Ireland. We must see these two alphabetic efforts as local and cumbersome efforts to work within the Latin alphabet to communicate simple messages, and, especially in the case of runes, to preserve and transmit secret messages –the word *rune*, after all, appearing to derive from an archaic Germanic root meaning 'secret,' or 'whisper.'

RENAISSANCE. EARLY MODERN PERIOD

Type. By the time of the Renaissance the Latin alphabet had diffused widely, proving itself the central vehicle for communication, business, international trade, and the arts of writing. The rapid spread of universities of course promoted the need for an effective alphabet, as well as for the tools that go with it---paper, parchment, pens, notebooks. In all of these services the Latin alphabet evolved into a global usage pad. Nothing was so central to consecrating this alphabet as the printing press, which in the mid-fifteenth century set Europe on fire with new things to do with its collective intelligence. (One struggles still to encompass the implications of movable type, and will struggle longer and harder to understand the implications of the internet.)

'Hands.' Within the elite style making fraternities of printers, illlustrators, and textual scholars, of Renaissance Italy, followers let's say of the poet Petrarca, there was a turning back to ancient 'hands' in an effort to restore the true classical style, instead of what these modernists considered the dark Gothic writing style of the late Postclassical period. By an accident, however, the Renaissance writing stylists mistook the fine light hand of the Carolingian scribes for the ancient, with the result that the new script forms generated during the Renaissance came to resemble the finest work accomplished at the court of Charlemagne.

Florence. Two Florentine friends, secretaries at the Papal Court from 1403, set an enduring style. Poggio Bracciolini blended the rounded lower case letters of the Carolingians with square capitals,

images taken directly from the style of inscriptions on Roman monuments. Niccolo Niccoli, Poggio's friend and fellow stylist, made two innovations: by sloping the pen of the stylist he invented a comfortable script angle, at which it was convenient to establish a bridge from one letter to the next, creating a newly useable *cursive*. The style established by Bracciolini, upright but rounded, morphed into the fifteenth century style called *roman*. Another great Italian printer of the time, Aldus Manutius, seeking for a small sized font in which to print a 'pocket' edition of Virgil, developed a style called *italic*, still in common use at our time. We were, in other words, at a time of high inventiveness for the Latin script. (Our finest historicizing poet, Ezra Pound, makes seminal use of the workshop of Aldus Minutius, in the *Cantos.)*

EIGHTEENTH/NINETEENTH CENTURIES.

Society.   After the great Italian period of script innovation, discussed above, a variety of cursive forms developed which were given the general name of Copperplate script. (It was through a copperplate process that printed calligraphy reached the public at this time in printing history.) The two chief 'hands' in use were the Italian hand, and the round-hand, an English form: these two styles were taught to men and women, respectively, of course; where 'men and women' refer to the privileged classes, who at this time, as we see throughout European fiction, commonly hired a 'writing master,' to see to the next generation's perfection of cultural style. These 'hands' stressed flowing style which could be applied to all letters of the alphabet except x. The Latin script had by this time been so deeply incorporated in Western European life-practice that it became a benchmark of social correctness.

TWENTIETH CENTURY.

Typefaces.   By 1900 there were two main typeface alternatives, for the Latin alphabet, in use in Europe. These were *Antiqua* and *Fraktur*. *Fraktur* was in use for German, the Baltic languages, Norwegian and Danish, while *Antiqua* was prominent in English and the Romance language speaking nations. Hitler banned the use of *Fraktur*, as a Jewish form of lettering. The simplification of formats—though they proliferate on the editing drop-down bar of my Mac—is evidence that for the majority of script users today the message has decisively conquered the medium, to circle back on Marshall McCluhan's thinking. In an age when the learning and use of cursive have sharply declined, when the writing act has been stripped of most of its existential features, and when the printed script loses all visual identity, and becomes simply a vehicle of thought (thought?) construction.

The aesthetic.   Or is it so simple? Edward Johnston, an English designer working in the milieu of the Bloomsbury Group at the end of the nineteenth century, and well into the twentieth, carried into his philosophy of calligraphy the spirit of traditionalism and authentic care, which he felt being drained from the script-instruction of his own time. In his *Writing and Illuminating, and Lettering* (1906) Johnston created a manifesto of traditionalism in the practice of the finest traditions of cursive writing, and proposed ways in which the youth of his culture could once more write with style. That plea came out of the world of Bloomsbury, and yet it falls still today on the ears of the beleaguered proponents of cursive in the elementary schools of Western European democracies.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Why did the Latin script prevail in Western Europe? Does the fate of a script depend entirely on the power of its users? Were the ancient Greeks, whose power was diffuse over island and lands and rocky inlets, people whose power empowered their language to take over much of Eastern Europe?

The development of the Latin script involved many modifications—a letter added here, a letter fallen away, there—until the final number of twenty six letters was arrived at. Do you think there is some 'natural' rightness in such a figure? Would you expect the number of letters in the Latin alphabet to continue changing? If so, what would govern that change?

At what points has the Latin script been seen as an artistic achievement, rather than used as a vehicle? What triggers the perception that the script one is using is of aesthetic value? Why is that kind of perception relatively rare?

SUGGESTED READING

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