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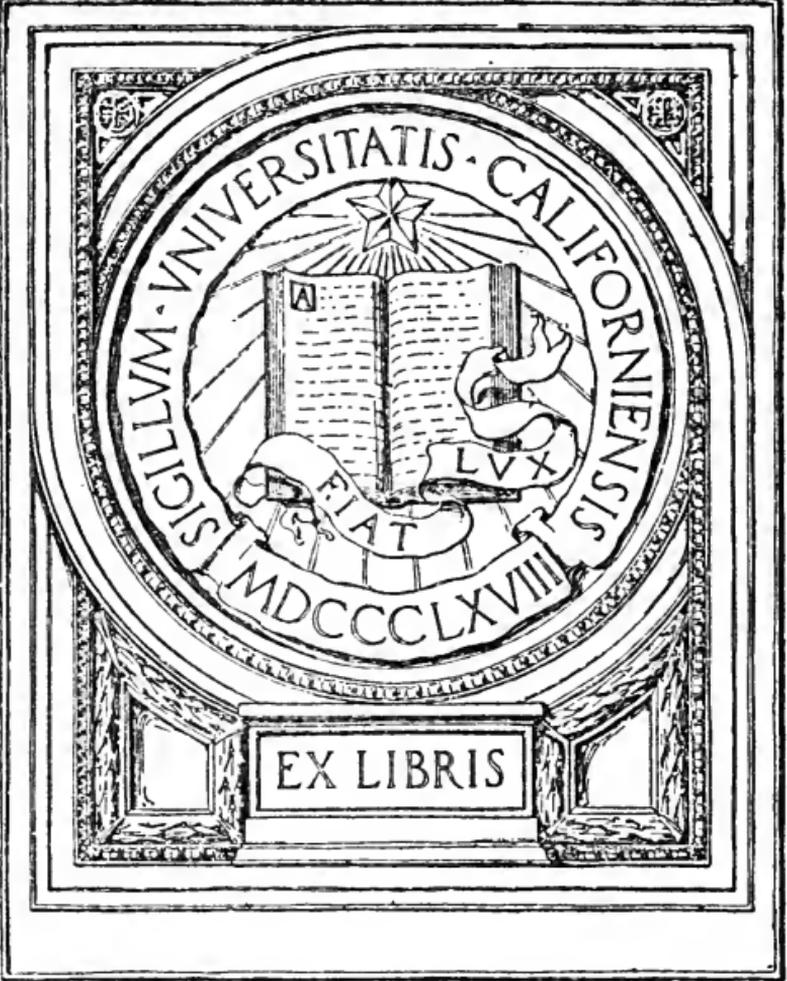
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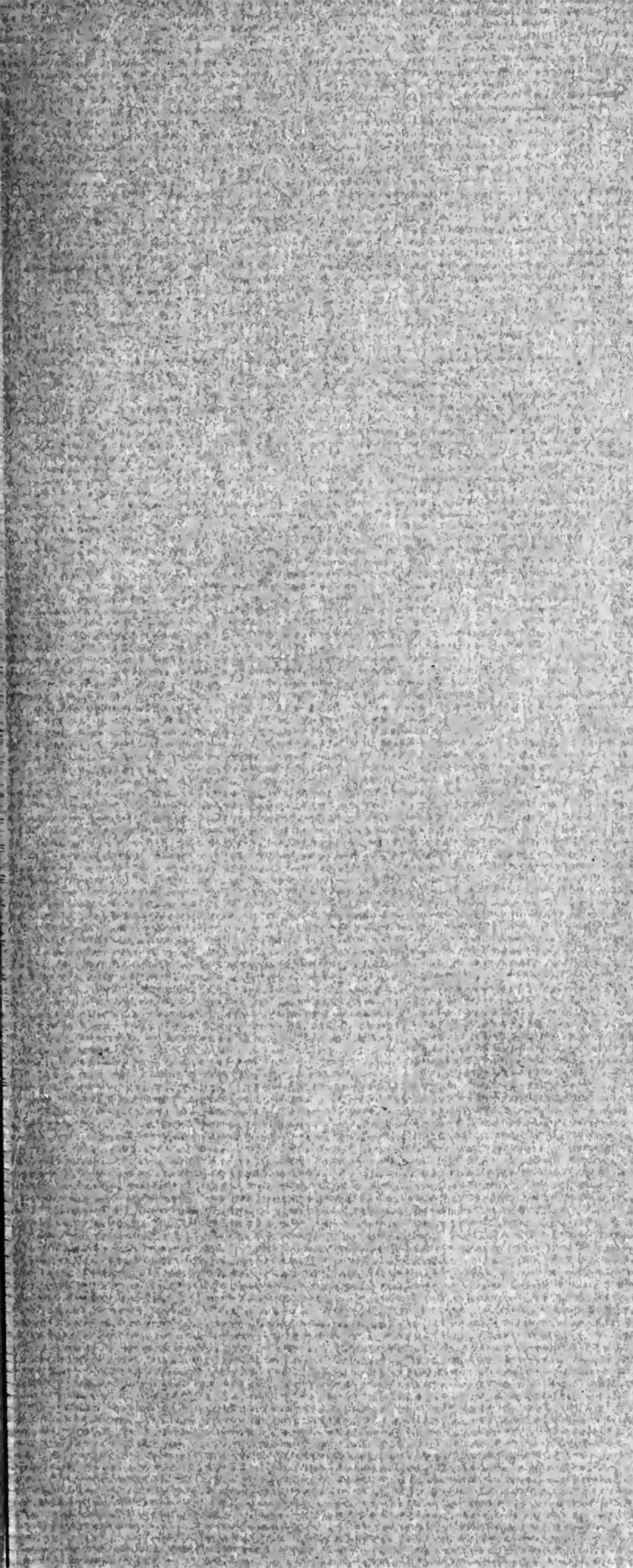
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THE STORY OF
THE ALPHABET

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The
STORY OF
the
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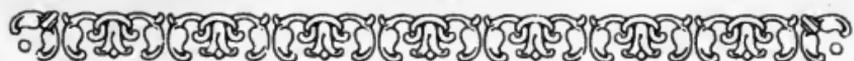


BY OTTO F. EGE
The Cleveland School of Art

*"Many thanks to old Cadmus,
Who made us his debtors
By inventing, one day, those
CAPITAL LETTERS."*

—Saxe

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THE STORY OF THE ALPHABET

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ITS EVOLUTION AND DEVELOPMENT

Do you know your A B C's? Each Letter Character Has a History and a Reason for Its Present Form. Have you Ever Questioned the Origin and Significance of the Alphabet?



OUR transition from barbarism to civilization can be attributed to the alphabet. Those great prehistoric discoveries and inventions such as the

making of a fire, the use of tools, the wheel and the axle, and even our modern marvelous applications of steam and electricity pale into insignificance when compared with the power of the alphabet. Simple as it now appears after the accustomed use of ages, it can be accounted not only the most difficult, but also the most fruitful of all the achievements of the human intellect.

Man lived by "bread alone" and without the alphabet untold ages, and with a practical alphabetic system not more than 3,000 years. So important and wonderful was this step deemed by those who lived nearer the time of its inception—in the time before the wonder of its extraordinary powers had been blunted by long possession and common use—that its invention, as well as that of writing, was invariably attributed to divine origin.

Modern investigation always seeks sources other than mythological ones, and thus the science of ancient handwriting, paleography, came into existence. In the last hundred and

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twenty-five years the writing of the ancient Egyptians, which was a "sealed book" for nearly twenty centuries, has been deciphered through the efforts of Champollion and Young; the mysterious cuneiform characters of ancient Assyria and Babylon have been interpreted by Grotfend and Rawlinson, and the "missing link" to connect our present alphabetic system to these ancient ones is being partly completed by Sir Arthur Evans, who is compiling and analyzing Cretan characters and pre-Phoenician writing. The story, however, will probably never be told in its entirety.

THE forms of our letters, with the exception of G, J, U, W, reached their full development two thousand years ago. The Roman letter was the parent of all the styles notwithstanding the diversity that has appeared in Europe since the beginning of the Christian era. With a little imagination it is not difficult to note the resemblance between similar letters of the old Roman capitals and those following that have been designated as script, italic, Old English or black letter, versal, uncial, and an endless list of alphabet families. The desire for speed, and the influence of the tool, pen, reed, chisel, brush, were the determining factors in the change of form. Curiously enough instead of being archaic, the Roman alphabet, which is now 2,000 years old, is still the most useful because of its legibility, and also the most beautiful.

We derived twenty-three of our letters from the Romans. They had taken probably eighteen of these from the Greeks about the fourth century B. C. and afterwards borrowed elsewhere or invented seven more. Instead of giv-

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ing them names as the Greeks did, they simply called them by the sounds for which they stood: A (ah), B (bay). They introduced the curve wherever possible, whereas the early Greek letters were all angular—what an interesting analogy is evident in the architecture of those two peoples, the temple pediment and angularity of the Greeks as contrasted with the dome and arch of the Romans.

The Greeks, in their contact with those great traders and “Yankees of ancient time,” the Phoenicians, saw the value of their alphabetic writing and inaugurated its use about the time of the first Olympiad, 776 B. C. Three or four centuries before they gave it to the Romans the ancient Greeks found use for fifteen of the Phoenician letters and then conceived enough to round out an alphabet of twenty-four characters. The changes that took place in the shape of their letters can be attributed to their sense of order; the letters are balanced better and the parts better related.

THE Greeks were interested in the sound value only, not in the picture value of the symbol, and, therefore, they probably did not notice that A, for instance, had ever been a picture of the head of an ox and that it was now drawn upside down; and that the Phoenician name “Alpeh” meant ox and that they mispronounced the sound in calling it “Alpha.”

The Romans borrowed from the Greeks and the Greeks had borrowed from the Phoenicians, but where did the Phoenicians obtain their letters? Did they invent them? To what extent were these letters influenced by earlier systems of writings as those employed by the Cretan, Assyrian and Egyptian civilizations? These are questions that probably will never

be answered satisfactorily. Many arguments and theories are advanced. We can, however, trace back with certainty a number of our letters to the Phoenician alphabet of 1000 B. C. Beyond this all is, at present, a matter of conjecture.

The Phoenician alphabet consisted of twenty-two pictures of familiar objects. These pictures were rudely and simply made, for writers and readers soon recognized the fundamental characteristics and all unnecessary details were eliminated. The great advance that can be credited to them is that they realized that a small number of sound-expressing characters, if well selected, are sufficient to express any word. Other races at this period had phonetic systems but they consisted of numerous symbols and cumbersome appendages of non-alphabetic characters—"eye pictures" side by side with "ear pictures." No doubt earlier Phoenician writing passed through the stages of development traceable in so many countries:

1. The pictures or characters suggesting the thing or incident (picture writing).
2. The pictures or characters symbolizing the thing or idea (ideographic or symbolic writing).
3. The pictures or characters representing the sound of the thing or idea (phonograms).
4. The sign suggesting the various sounds of the language (alphabetic system).

To free this last stage from the others was the great Phoenician contribution.

A

Why is A the first letter? It represents one of the commonest vowel sounds in ancient languages. Naturally the Phoenician alpha-

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bet makers selected a familiar object in the name of which this particular vowel sound was emphasized. Since food is of primal importance, it is not surprising to find that he chose the ox—"Alef" (ah'lef), or rather the head of the ox, for the characteristics of animals are chiefly embodied in the head. Not only was the ox important as food but also as a beast of burden, for the ox had been harnessed to the plow centuries before the horse was domesticated. Thus one of the earliest and most important of man's friends among the brute creatures was honored.

In making this letter repeatedly and rapidly they became careless and instead of crossing the letter V they tried to make it with one continuous scratching, hence when the Greeks became acquainted with it three to five centuries after its invention; the picture had deteriorated almost beyond recognition. They introduced balance and the V was inverted, and the cross-bar was retained between the lines. Unknowingly they were drawing the ox head upside down; and it remains so with us to this day. The Greeks called the first letter alpha, the Romans called it A (ah) and we call it A (ay), a sound it never possessed in Latin.

B

The second letter of the alphabet represents a crude house, roughly outlined. After food, shelter is an important consideration and this fact was expressed by the early alphabet maker. The Greeks again were ignorant of the picture and careless or indifferent as to the exact name of the character, and thus two triangles instead of the square supporting a triangle were made and the name

changed from "beth" to "beta" (ba'ta). Combine the Greek names for the first two letters and we have (alpha-beta) "alphabet." The Romans shortened the name "beta," calling it B (bay) and introduced the curved loops. The original name is familiar to us through names found in the Scriptures: Bethel (house of God) and Bethlehem (house of bread).

C - G

The "ship of the desert," the camel, gave its name to the third letter. Our name for this animal is traceable back to the Phoenician "gimel" (ghe'mel) or "gamel" (gah'mel). The long neck and the peculiar angle of the neck in relation to the head could easily be represented. The Greeks made changes similar to those in other letters—they improved the shape and changed the name to "gamma." The Romans did not forget the curve and gave it both the hard and soft sounds (kay and gay). Later on, about the third century A. D., to distinguish the "g" sound from the "k" sound they added a little bar below the opening. Thus we get both C and G from the picture of the camel.

Stevenson said that when he was a child the capital G always impressed him as a genii swooping down to drink out of a handsome cup. Kipling's story of the invention of the alphabet is filled with similar delightful stories of the picture origin of letter forms.

D

The next letter D, came from a representation of a door—"daleth" (dahleth). It probably pictures the door of a tent. A custom that prevails among the Arabs and in a num-

ber of countries gave particular importance to the door of a tent—a stranger, or even an enemy, if he entered through the door of a tent must receive food, drink and shelter. “Daleth” became “delta” with the Greeks and D (day) with the Romans, who, of course, rounded the angle.

E

The house picture gave us B, the door, D, and the window, E. “He” (hay) meant to look, to see, or window, and one writer asserts our familiar street cry “hey, there” can be traced to these ancient times. One side bar of the window was lost early.

The Greeks at first used this sound for the long “e” (epsilon) but afterwards employed the character H or “eta” for the long sound. The Romans at first made no change except to call it “eh.”

This is the letter that occurs so frequently in English words, and many no doubt recall the interesting use that Poe makes of this fact in his story “The Gold Bug.”

F

Our letter order does not agree with that of the Phoenicians or the early Greeks. Our sixth letter, F, is missing in classical Greek, but it is found in earlier writings. It comes from a Phoenician representation of a hook or nail (?) “vau.” The Hebrew form resembles the latter object. The nail was important in shipbuilding, a common industry of the early traders. When the Greeks used this letter they called it “digamma” (double gamma) and its form represented one “gamma” (Greek c) superimposed over the other. The

Genealogy of Our Letters from t

Phoenician 1300-1000 B.C. Form, meaning, name	Greek 700-500 B.C. Form, name
𐤀 𐤁 = ox Aleph	Α Α Alpha
𐤂 𐤃 = house Beth	Β Β Beta
𐤄 𐤅 = camel Gimel	Γ Γ Gamma
𐤆 𐤇 = door Daleth	Δ Δ Delta
𐤈 𐤉 = window He	Ε Ε Epsilon
𐤊 𐤋 = hook Vau	Υ Φ [Digamma]
𐤌 𐤍 = fence Cheth	Η Η Eta
𐤎 𐤏 = hand Yod	Ι Ι Iota
𐤑 𐤒 = palm Kaph	Κ Κ Kappa
𐤓 𐤔 = whip Lamed	Λ Λ Lambda
𐤕 𐤖 = water Mem	Μ Μ Mu
𐤗 𐤘 = fish Nun	Ν Ν Nu
𐤙 𐤚 = eye Ayin	Ο Ο Omicron
𐤛 𐤜 = mouth Pe	Π Π Pi
𐤝 𐤞 = knot? head? Koph	Φ Φ Koppa
𐤟 𐤠 = head Resh	Ρ Ρ Rho
𐤡 𐤢 = teeth Shin	Σ Σ Sigma
𐤣 𐤤 = mark Tahv	Τ Τ Tau
	Υ Υ Upsilon
	Υ Υ Upsilon
𐤦 𐤧 = post Samech	Χ Χ Xi
	Υ Υ Upsilon
𐤩 𐤪 = weapon Zayin	Ζ Ζ Zeta

Phoenician Alphabet 1300 B.C.

Roman Form, sound	500 B.C.	Evolution of small letters 300 to 800 A.D.	Gothic 1200 A.D.	Italic 1500 A.D.	Script 1600 A.D.
A	Ah	𐤀 𐤁 𐤂	𐌰 𐌱 𐌲	a	a
B	Bay	𐤃 𐤄 𐤅	𐌳 𐌴 𐌵	b	b
C	Kay	𐤆 𐤇 𐤈	𐌶 𐌷 𐌸	c	c
D	Day	𐤉 𐤊 𐤋	𐌹 𐌺 𐌻	d	d
E	Eh	𐤌 𐤍 𐤎	𐌼 𐌽 𐌾	e	e
F	Ef	𐤏 𐤐 𐤑	𐌿 𐍀 𐍁	f	f
G		𐤒 𐤓 𐤔	𐍂 𐍃 𐍄	g	g
H	Hah	𐤕 𐤖 𐤗	𐍅 𐍆 𐍇	h	h
I	Ee	𐤘 𐤙 𐤚	𐍈 𐍉 𐍊	i	i
J			𐍋 𐍌 𐍍	j	j
K	Kah	𐤛 𐤜 𐤝	𐍎 𐍏 𐍐	k	k
L	El	𐤞 𐤟 𐤠	𐍑 𐍒 𐍓	l	l
M	Em	𐤡 𐤢 𐤣	𐍔 𐍕 𐍖	m	m
N	En	𐤤 𐤥 𐤦	𐍗 𐍘 𐍙	n	n
O	Oh	𐤧 𐤨 𐤩	𐍚 𐍛 𐍜	o	o
P	Pay	𐤫 𐤬 𐤭	𐍝 𐍞 𐍟	p	p
Q	Koo	𐤮 𐤯 𐤰	𐍠 𐍡 𐍢	q	q
R	Air	𐤱 𐤲 𐤳	𐍣 𐍤 𐍥	r	r
S	Ess	𐤴 𐤵 𐤶	𐍧 𐍨 𐍩	s	s
T	Tay	𐤸 𐤹 𐤺	𐍪 𐍫 𐍬	t	t
V	Oo	𐤼 𐤽 𐤾	𐍭 𐍮 𐍯	u	u
V		𐤿 𐍀 𐍁	𐍰 𐍱 𐍲	v	v
W		𐍃 ^{wen. 11th centh} Anglo-Saxon } W	𐍳 𐍴 𐍵	w	w
X	Eex	𐍅 𐍆 𐍇	𐍶 𐍷 𐍸	x	x
Y	ü	𐍉 𐍊 𐍋	𐍹 𐍺 𐍻	y	y
Z	Zayta	𐍍 𐍎 𐍏	𐍼 𐍽 𐍾	z	z

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Romans called it F (ef) and during the reign of Emperor Claudius the consonant V was represented by the F inverted. This was done because the Latin alphabet had but one character to represent U and V and OCTAVIA became OCTAVIA.

H

Two fence posts and three horizontal boards gave us our eighth letter, H. The fence was called "cheth" (haith). The Greeks omitted the upper and lower boards thus making it like our H, and called it "eta" (ata). The Romans gave it a soft sound H (hah) just as we do today.

I-J

The parts of the human body also played an important part in giving form to the letters of the alphabet. The early peoples recognized the value of the hand and the head and these members gave rise to the letters I and K, and Q and R respectively. The hand in profile bent at the knuckles and wrist gives us the character "yod" (the hand) as used by the Phoenicians. The Greeks, who always liked to have their words end in vowels, added "a" and called it "Iota" (e-o'ta). When the Romans received it, it was simply a vertical stroke, I (ee) which represented the same long "e" sound as it did with the Greeks, but later they used it both as a consonant and vowel, differentiating the consonant by making the letter I longer, J; but they did not give a distinct letter form for the capital J until the sixteenth century.

The small j came into being nearly a century later. The dot over the i was first introduced in a thirteenth century manuscript.

K

The silhouette of the open hand, with its radiating lines, discloses the origin of the letter K, "kaph," which signified hollow or palm. We know that palmistry was practiced by the ancients, and probably the association of reading the hand and writing influenced the inclusion of this character. The Greeks added their favorite vowel sound, "a," again and thus obtained their "Kappa." The Romans had no need for this letter at first, as C furnished the same sound. When they did accept it, they made no change.

L

The ox goad or whip lash, "lamed" (lah' med) gave rise to the next letter. Herding oxen and sheep was the important occupation of the slaves of the Phoenicians and hence the last, an object so unfamiliar to us, was easily recognized by them. The Greeks again added an "a" and called it "lambda" and made it in the form of an inverted V. The Romans, strangely, adhered more closely to the original form than did the Greeks.

M-N

The Phoenicians were lovers of the sea, and from this source two letters were derived, M and N. They explored not only all of the Mediterranean shore at an early date, but they also sailed boldly through the gates of Gibraltar, and "beyond the world" where they found Britain. They were the first navigators that sailed by night and it is said they discovered the north star. Therefore it is not surprising that water "mem" (maim) is the

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source of M and that fish, "nun" (noon) the source of N. The letter M has changed but little in form, it is the Greek letter "Mu" and the Roman M (em). The head of the fish, from which the letter N is pictured, was simplified even more than the head of the ox, in A. It no doubt represents the fisherman's viewpoint—not a swimming fish but a suspended one. The Greeks reversed the stroke and called it "Nu" and the Romans did not change its form but called it N (en).

O

In Phoenicia, as in Egypt, China and Mexico, the eye is one of the commonest elements found in the writing. It was called "Ayin" (ah-yin). The Greeks used it for two sounds now designated by "omicron," little "o," and "omega," great "o," the letter which, strangely, was placed at the end of the Greek alphabet. We find in the Bible: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last." How many today would think of using the alphabet for such an important illustration? It is easy to trace the Roman O (oh) from its Greek parent, "omicron."

P

Many letter pictures run in pairs—finger and hand, water and fish—and now after eye we find mouth "pi" (pe) which represents the lower lip. The Greeks made little change in the name or shape at first, but later they introduced the angles and made the downward strokes equal. The Romans formed the letter by continuing the curve farther than the Phoenicians and called it "pe" (pay).

Q-R

Now we come to Q and R, the letters which were mentioned above as those probably coming from the head. Whether Q (koph) was derived from the picture of the back view of the head and neck, or whether it represents a knot, which, no doubt, was as important to navigators then as it is now, is a mooted question. The Q sound is guttural and the tail of the letter is supposed to indicate the throat sound. The Greeks soon discarded "koppa," as it was called, and the Romans went back to the original source for their Q (koo).

The back view of the head is the unusual one, for as we look at the drawing of the early races, or memory pictures, or the delineations of a child of seven or eight we find they are almost without exception profile pictures. The Phoenician "resh" represents the profile and shows very little resemblance to a human being, although at first the features may have been more clearly indicated. The Greeks, as was to be expected, turned the letter around, and later, oddly enough, introduced a curve making it exactly like the Roman letter P. The extra stroke which we find in the Roman letter was no doubt due to the carelessness in copying. They pronounced it R (air).

S

There is a common legend explaining S, the letter with the hissing sound. Because of its curved shape and its hissing sound many people believe it to be derived from a snake. Its real history is easily followed from Phoenician "shin" or "sin" (teeth) to the present day.

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Its form closely resembled our W. The Greeks made it perpendicular for their "sigma" and the Romans simplified and curved it giving S (ess).

T

Our twentieth letter, T, is particularly interesting because it is derived from "tahv" a mark or cross made by people who could not write, and no doubt their signature frequently resembled it. We must not forget that even Charlemagne and other kings of the middle ages had to make their mark or trace their initials through stencil plates. The only change of "tahv" to Greek "tau," and to Roman T (tay) was the raising of the cross bar.

U-V-Y

The letters U, V and Y were all taken from the letter "Upsilon," and it may have been derived from the queer Hebrew form of "Ayin" which closely resembles Y. The letters U and V were interchangeable. Upsilon, known as the "Samian letter," was used by Pythagoras as an emblem to represent the parting of the ways—the young man making a choice in life.

W

Our Anglo-Saxon forefathers contributed two letters, W (wen) and another often confused with Y, called "thorn." These were introduced during the thirteenth century. The French always called the former letter double vay, and in English it may be said to represent double U, as its name indicates. The letter "thorn" had the value of the digraph "th," and "ye" in old English should be pronounced "the" like the definite article.

X-Z

Although we have no direct need for the letter X, for Z can be substituted for it when it is used as an initial letter, and “ks” when used elsewhere, it has remained in the alphabet since its frequent use by the Greeks. It came from the Roman X (eex) which may have been derived from the Greek “ksi.” The latter resembles the Phoenician character “samech,” meaning a post or support.

The dagger “zayin” from which we obtain our Z must have been important in the daily lives of the Greeks, Hebrews and Phoenicians for it occupies the sixth place (Zeta) and the seventh in the latter alphabets. The Romans did not change its name or shape, but although there has been little change in 2,000 years we see little resemblance to the short sword in the letter the Romans gave to us.

MANY slight changes that have occurred in the formation of the letters of the alphabet may be accounted for. At first the Greeks wrote from left to right in one line and from right to left on the next line—a mode of writing which has been termed “boustrophedon” because it runs as an ox plow does in a field, up one furrow and down another. It is due to this fact that many letters were reversed from their original prototypes. It is interesting to note that recently books for the blind have been embossed in this manner.

The small letters of the alphabet, sometimes called “lower case” letters because printers keep them in a case below the capitals, or “minuscule letters” in contrast with “majuscule,” or capital letters, illustrate further changes

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due to rapid writing of capitals in a cursive or running hand.

The few characters selected by the Phoenicians, the great traders, artificers and farmers of the ancient world, not only influenced Greek literature and life, Roman and modern nations in Europe, but also spread eastward to the very walls of China. The Hebrews copied them as a whole and retained the original names with only slight variations. They did change the shapes because a different writing instrument was employed.

According to a legend, Jehovah gave the letters to Moses, hence all the left curves in Hebrew letter form turn upward—as symbols of a finger pointing heavenward.

The Phoenician alphabet is also the parent of the Arabic, Indian, Javanese, Corean, Tibetan, Coptic syllabaries and alphabets. No small country ever gave such a great gift to humanity; no large country could have given a greater gift.

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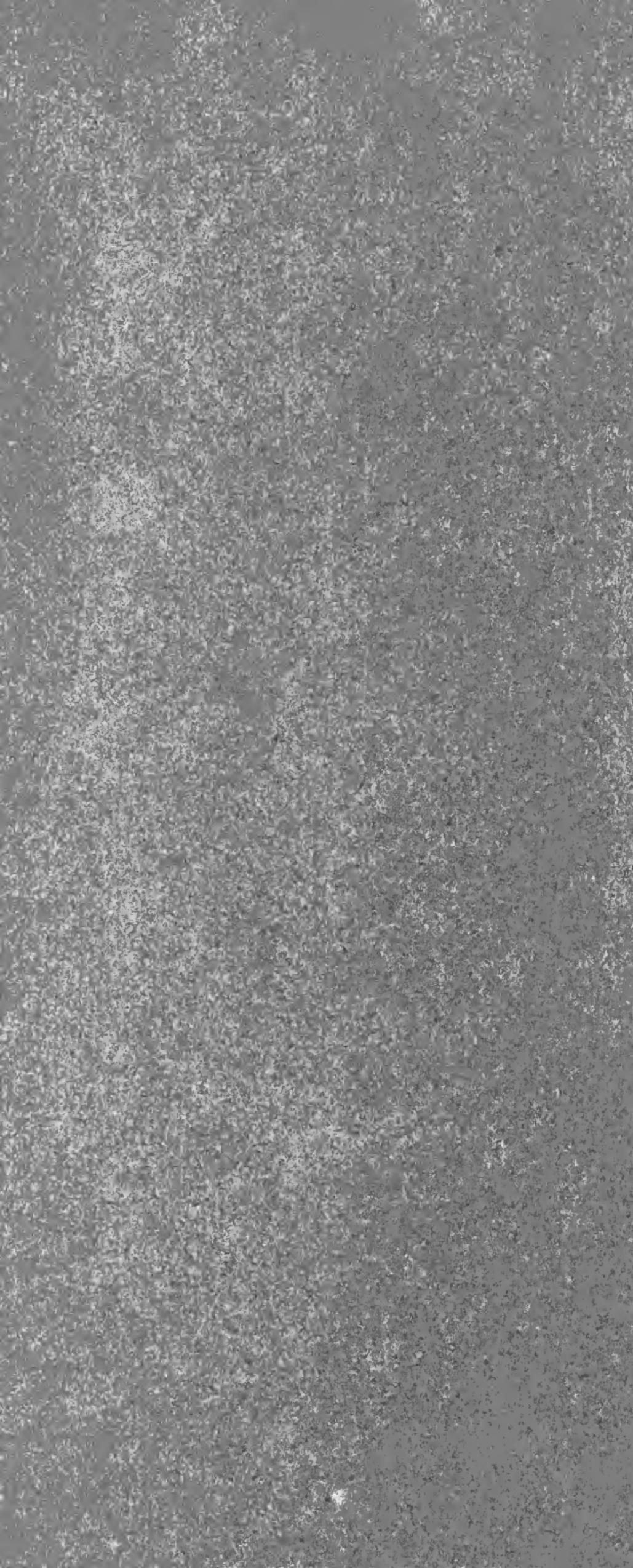
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