

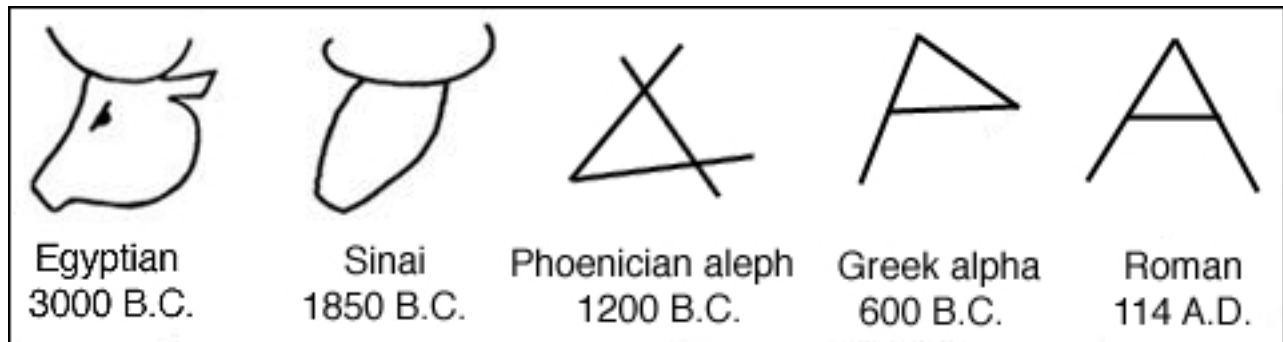
# The Origin of our Alphabet

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This page has been so popular with visitors to the NuSpel website that it has been relocated to make it more readily accessible to teachers and others. The new PDF version also makes printouts much more presentable.

The alphabet is without doubt one of the greatest creations of the human mind. Since prehistoric times "writing" has taken many forms, from Egyptian pictographs to the "quipus" of the Incas, a type of visual/tactile messages based on knots. Each knot on a cord designated a syllable of the word represented at the head of the cord. The leap from pictoric representations to symbols standing for the sounds of speech revolutionized visual-graphic communication.

The transition from an Egyptian pictograph depicting an ox to a symbol representing a sound is illustrated below. Named "alef" (ox) by ancient Semites, it was converted to "alpha" by the Greeks and together with Semitic "beth," meaning "house," it formed the basis for what we now call in English the alpha-bet. (Hebrew *Bethlehem* = house of bread; *Bethel* = house of God or temple. Think of **B** being like a typical boxy two-story structure in the Near East.) Note that Phoenician "aleph" preserved a semblance of horns.



The fact that the Phoenician symbol originally meant *ox* meant nothing to the Greeks and it ended up upside-down, remaining topsy-turvy till our day. Few people have a clue regarding the origin of the alphabet and would be surprised to know that it's the "oxhouse." Inscriptions recently discovered at Wadi el-Hol in upper

Egypt may have set the invention of the alphabet at an earlier date than previously supposed. Scholars believe they were made by Semites living in Egypt during the Middle Kingdom period (c. 2040-1674 B.C.). The Sinai symbol represented above (in the same proto-Canaanite or proto-Sinaitic script and dated to approximately 1650 to 1550 B.C.) was discovered in west central Sinai.

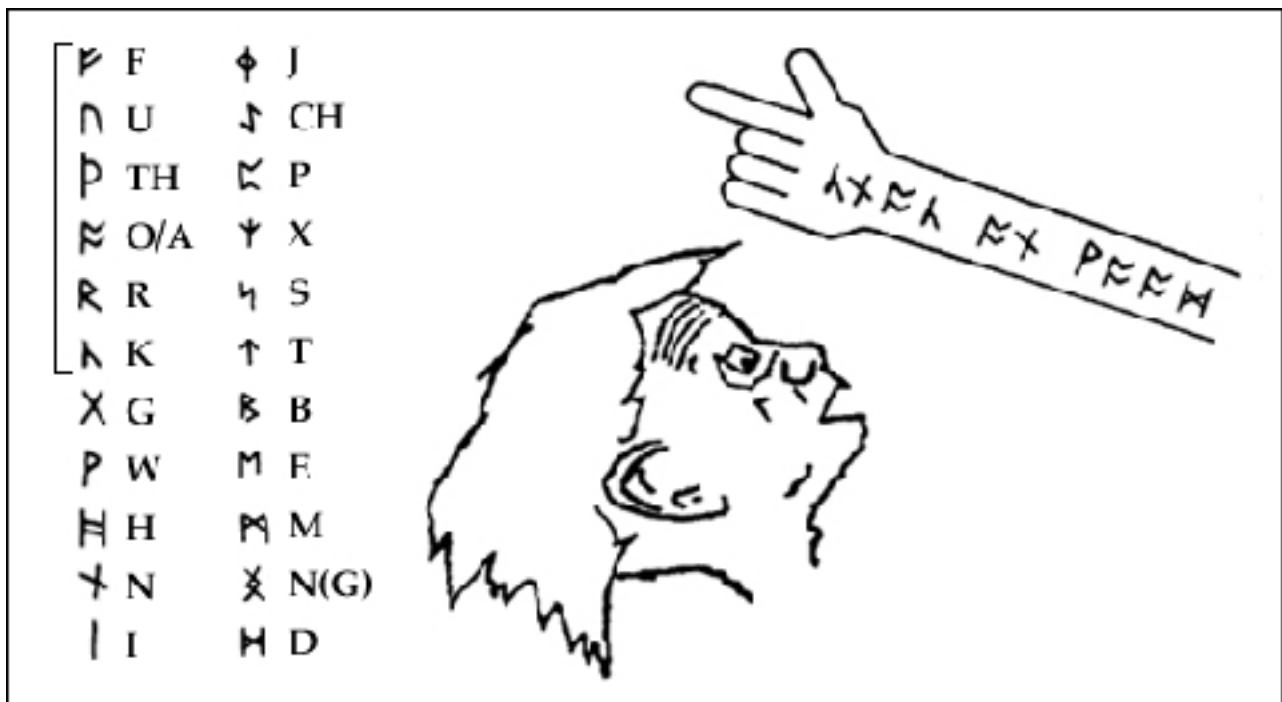
Linguists can only speculate as to what particular sounds the Sinai letter and aleph indicated, though both have been characterized as "a light breathing sound," whatever that might be. In any case, languages constantly change phonetically in time and space. Italian, French, Portuguese, Spanish, etc. obviously are sister languages, all descended from Latin, and the Spanish of Buenos Aires can easily be recognized as somewhat different from that of Madrid. This explains to a large extent, why our alphabet and our spelling need to be reformed.

The alphabet is referred to in various languages as the ABCs, *das ABC* (German), *el abecedario* (Spanish), etc. Recent archaeological discoveries indicate that it could have ended up being called the LMNs—the "elemen-tary". Evidence provided by potsherds and acrostics bridging two of the Psalms indicate that to simplify learning of the ancient Semitic alphabet, it was divided into two halves, one beginning with the letters Lamed (shepherd's staff) and Mem (water) and the other with Alef (ox) and Beth (house). Mem had the shape of waves:  $\wedge\wedge\wedge\wedge\dots$ . Whether called the ABCs or whatever, it constitutes one of humanity's most marvelous and useful inventions.

## First the Futhark, then a Revised Roman Alphabet

Subsequent to the invention of the "alef-bet," additional alphabets evolved, including among others the Arabic and Cyrillic (Russian) ones. Teutonic runes, once widely used for writing, are now remembered primarily as a medium for casting and neutralizing superstitious charms—for example, the still familiar one of knocking on wood to ward off anticipated evil. The Anglo-Saxon version above incorporates a few more letters than others, including "thorn" (pronounced as in *think*). Runic alphabets were commonly referred to as

the *futhark* for the sounds of the first six letters. Please note that the pronunciation was futhark, not fut-hark



When the Latin alphabet replaced the futhorc in England, **p** was retained. After the invention of the printing press, the letter **Y**, which closely resembled a gradually modified **p**, came to be used for both /θ/ and /ð/ (a Latin <d> with a line through it), despite the fact that they contrast directly with each other in words like *thorn* and *those*, *think* and *this*, *there* and *Thair*.

Today, signs like "Ye Olde Antique Shoppe" look quite quaint to us. Mistakenly, we take the supposedly antique sound of ye to be equally quaint. Actually, however, it was pronounced the same way that the word *the* commonly is today: stressed before a vowel (*thee* other day), otherwise stressed (Say "*thuh*"), unstressed (*th'* news), and only later interpreted as [yi] (yee) by those not in the know. Ultimately it was spelled and printed as "the."

Eventually, with the addition of c, q, u, and w, a total of 26 letters was reached. Twenty-six and no more! Unsystematic and too few. How sad!