B

S aid Hamlet to Ophelia, I'll draw a sketch of thee.
What kind of pencil shall I use? 2B or not 2B?

~ Spike Milligan

The constant companion of A is of course the second letter of our alphabet: B. Just as the letter is the deputy or trusty sidekick of the first letter, this chapter is essentially a sequel to Chapter A. It picks up where the alphabetic story of A left off, and takes it a bit further forward in time. Unlike its neighbour, B has been steadfast in its duty over the millennia, representing the consonant /b/ in *book*. So, while Chapter A quickly covered a millennium of changing sounds and symbols, Chapter B has less of an explanatory burden, and can take a more relaxed pace. It concentrates on the Greeks, and how they changed the direction of the alphabet forever, quite literally. It also introduces an essential concept of this book.

* * *

To recap the key ideas of the previous chapter, the phonetic function of B is all due to the ancient acrophonic principle. Way back in the Middle Kingdom of Egyptian history, Semitic speakers wanted to write down the sound /b/. They therefore chose a picture of a house, which in their language was a **bayt-*.[13] For the design of the symbolic house, they used an existing Egyptian hieroglyph:

This, I grant you, is a very abstract house. The symbol was already old and well used. The Egyptians used the single symbol either to spell their word for 'house', *pr*, or at least for the two consonants within that word.[14]

Semitic speakers were not interested in borrowing the Egyptians' word for 'house', but they would make good use of the symbol it was spelled with. Thus, they acquired a way to write the consonant /b/ in their language. Over the centuries, the shape would change. Tucking one of its arms in would lead to its Phoenician descendant:

The Phoenicians would spell their word for 'house' with the letter, always written right to left: 𐤁𐤉 (transliterated: BT). This ancient Semitic word is present in a famous place-name, which apparently once meant 'house of food': *Bethlehem*. The Phoenician name for 𐤁 also continued to be *bēt*, which was adopted by the Greeks as *beta*. So, when you *beta*-test a website today, or refer to the *alphabet*, you're saying an old name for the letter B, itself from an even older word for 'house'.

In our early records of the Greek alphabet, there is some variation in how the Greeks carved the shape of the letter 𐤁. Ultimately, a familiar two-looped Β shape wins out. There is an obvious issue here though: it's facing the wrong way.

Right from the beginning, the letters of the alphabet have 'faced' in the direction of writing. While it can get complicated to define the 'front' of a letter, we have an intuitive sense that Phoenician 𐤁 has a flat side and a pointy side. Writing from right to left, it was the pointy bit that looked ahead towards the end of its word and its line. The Greeks followed this principle too, but they were apparently more fluid than the Phoenicians in the direction of their writing. Some early texts were composed from right to left ('sinistrograde'), some from left to right ('dextrograde'). Some even went in both directions.

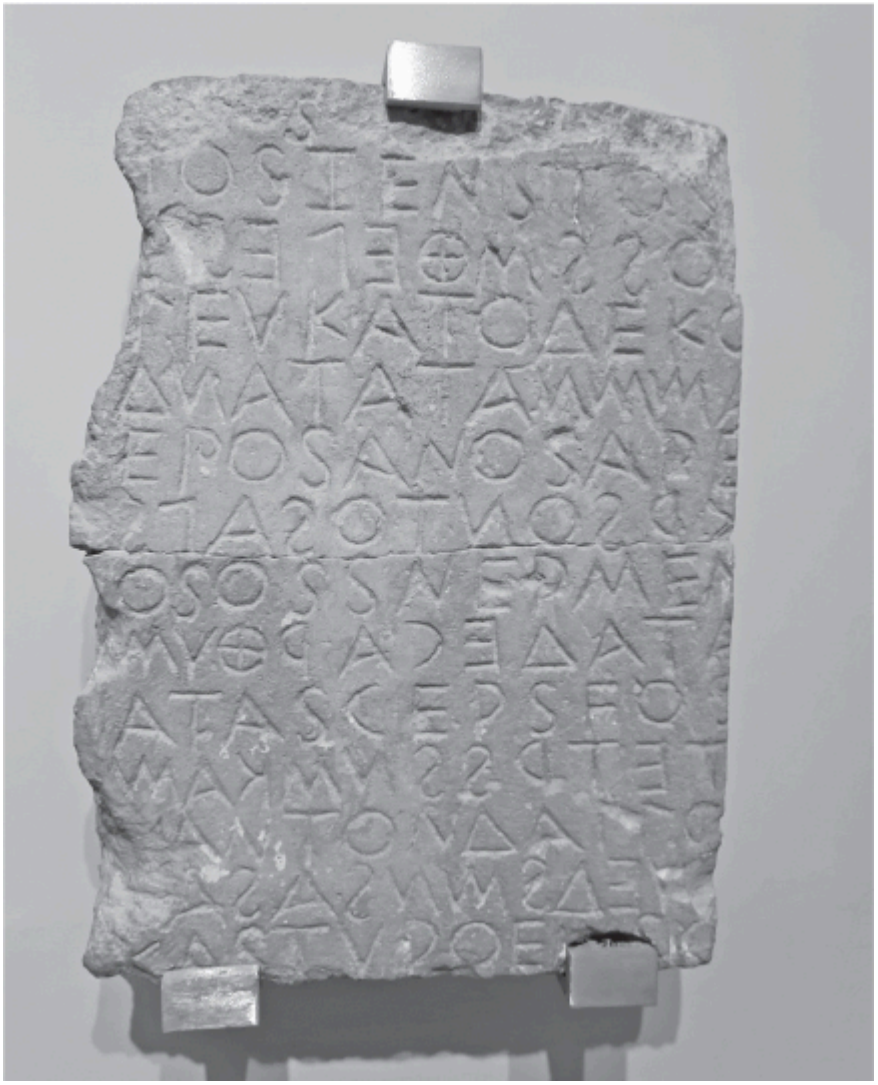
'Boustrophedon' is a marvellous bit of terminology. It's built from the Greek words βοῦς (*boûs*, meaning 'ox') and στροφή (*strophḗ*, 'turn')[15], inspired by the path of an ox as it pulls a plough up and down a field. Just as an ox reaches the edge then turns, the term refers to writing in which the line progresses in one direction,

.noitcerid etisoppo eht ni dna enil wen a ot segnahc yletaidemmi neht

Rather than shifting your pen (or rather, your chisel) to the other side of the page (or stone block), boustrophedon snakes its way in one direction

then the other.

Numerous reasons have been suggested for why the Greeks for a while wrote in this style. One is that it helped readers to read the text out loud, following the letters with their eye and finger in an unbroken sequence, rather than jumping back to one side over and over. Another theory is that the Greeks did not invent boustrophedon, but only continued an older Phoenician practice. The evidence for the style in Phoenicia is rare, though. Another is that boustrophedon simply looked nice, weaving a pleasing zig-zag pattern over monuments. Whatever its ancient reasons, boustrophedon caught on; we have texts not only from Greece, but also in the different languages of ancient Italy that likewise turn the text like the furrows of a field.



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So, we have a historical situation in which early Greek writers have acquired a script that was predominantly written right-to-left, but are also partial to left-to-right and a bit of boustrophedon. Out of these options, why then do the Greeks eventually settle on a left-to-right direction? Why are you not reading this line in the opposite direction, still following the Phoenicians?

The explanation for this switch may in fact lie in human biology. Some scholars have suggested that writing left-to-right won out in Greece because it was more comfortable or efficient for right-handed people, who were in the majority. This theory sounds plausible at first; it is true that we prefer to 'pull' the pen as we write, keeping what we have just written unobscured and unsmudged by our hand. If you cannot imagine the possible discomfort for the Greeks in writing right-to-left, just ask a left-handed person. However, the problem with this theory is that it cannot explain why it was the Greeks specifically who flipped the script. We have no reason to think that most Phoenicians were not also right-handers, as humans tend to be in general.

A fascinating alternative theory is all to do with reading, writing and the human brain. According to this idea, the key factor in the change in direction was the Greeks' creation of letters for vowels, like A. This changed the very act of reading; the alphabet went from being a script of only consonants, in which the reader had to guess at and supply the vowels themselves, to one in which all the sounds of the language were more or less represented in writing. For the Phoenicians, reading involved deciphering the written symbols according to context and memory; for the Greeks, it now involved conceptualising a sequence of sounds.

The Belgian scholar Derrick de Kerckhove has connected these two ways of spelling to the two hemispheres of the brain. Its right and left hemispheres are good at different things, and computing a completely phonetic sequence of letters is a job for the left hemisphere. Curiously, there is a mismatch between the sides of our brains and the rest of our bodies. Some of the body parts on our left are in fact connected to and controlled by the right hemisphere of the brain, and vice versa. For one thing, the left hemisphere, specifically around the back, receives input from our eyes' rightward field of vision.

To get the new vowel-added alphabet most quickly and accurately to the reader's left hemisphere, writing should progress into that right visual field

– that is, it should go from left to right. If still written right-to-left, the text would be scanned predominantly by the left visual field, transmitted to the right hemisphere of the brain, and only then passed on to the left for decipherment. The Greeks may not have been able to say why, but their new, fully alphabetic script was most efficiently read and written in a left-to-right direction.

So it was that the Phoenicians' letters got flipped. It should be emphasised that this was a distinctly Greek event; the flip did not happen back in Canaan. Consequently, writing in languages like Arabic and Hebrew to this day continues the older leftward direction. Since English traces its alphabet back through the Greeks, we are still living with the legacy of their brains today.

By the time of the classical era in Greece, from around 500 BCE, our letter B is recognisably up and running. It has two loops, which point to the right in the direction of writing, and it stands for the consonant /b/. It would later pass through time and space to become the second letter of the English alphabet, with the same shape and sound. We could therefore end the story of B there, having followed it from a hieroglyphic house to the familiar second-in-command of our alphabet.

However, there is more to the tale. The Greeks may have sent B off on its westward journey to English still faithful to the consonant /b/, but the sound of B has not remained the same for them. If you ask a Greek person today what the second letter of their alphabet is, they won't call it *beta*, but *veta*.

After its classical era came the popular period of the Greek language known as 'Koine' Greek. It became an international language, spoken far beyond what we today think of as Greece. Knowledge of Greek was very useful for travelling in any direction – west towards Italy, north to the Black Sea, south into Egypt and as far east as the Himalayas.[16] It was in Koine Greek that the gospels were written, the famous four narrative accounts of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. While clearly still Greek, time had passed and Koine Greek differed in various ways from the older classical language. It was during this period that the consonant /b/ in Greek speech shifted in its pronunciation.

This concept of sound change is a key idea of this book, and will crop up often. It's a completely natural phenomenon, yet it usually goes unnoticed

while you're living through one, aside from occasional remarks about sounding 'old-fashioned', sounding 'young' or not talking 'properly'. Potential sound changes lurk in the huge variety of sounds at work in our speech. Down the generations, parents then pass on that varied speech to their children. Hearing infants will listen attentively to incoming and surrounding speech, and they will unconsciously work out the phonetic building blocks that will produce the same strings of sounds as those their parents and other grown-ups are making. This amazing acquisition of language at such a young age would be considered miraculous if it weren't so common.

Yet the transmission of speech may not be exact; discrepancies can creep in between the generations. What children hit upon and produce may differ very subtly from the sounds of their parents, whose speech in turn is slightly different from their own parents'. It might take the form of a slightly higher tongue position for a vowel, or a greater tendency to drop one's Hs. All these subtle differences add up. Recordings of English from 70 years ago, only one lifetime, sound distinctly outdated. When we step back and consider language over many centuries, we find sound changes.

In this particular case, the sound /b/ shifted in Greek speech, eventually becoming /v/ (as in English *vote* or *vixen*) in most instances where the consonant appears. This was by no means a wild change; the two sounds have much in common. They are both pronounced with both or one of the lips, and both have the quality of **voicing**. The notable difference is that the airflow is temporarily stopped when we say /b/, but is continuous when we say /v/. In technical terms, this was a change from a stop sound to a **fricative** sound.

We see here how, even though speech so consistently changes, spelling does not necessarily need to follow. In the case of B, when instances of the Greek sound shifted across the board, its associated letter could stay the same. It represented whichever consonant the Greeks used it to denote, whether that be the original /b/ or the innovative /v/.

For an example, take the Modern Greek word for 'Saturday', which is Σάββατο. It is recognisably related to English *Sabbath*, the Jewish weekly day of rest (which is Saturday). Once, it would have been pronounced in Greek like *Sabbath*, but today it's pronounced like '*savato*'. Ever since the days of Koine Greek, the letter B (lower case: β) has been steadfast in the written word Σάββατο, but the sound behind that symbol has changed.[17]

The changed phonetic ‘value’ of the Greek letter beta did become an issue centuries later, when Greek took on vocabulary from other languages in the region. In spoken Greek today, there are indeed words that contain the sound /b/. Most are **loanwords**[18] adopted from other languages, like Turkish, which have not gone through the same sound change as Greek did. Robbed of a dedicated letter by sound change, Greek has resorted to spelling these new instances of /b/ with ΜΠ. For example, take the Modern Greek word for ‘dad’: μπαμπάς, pronounced ‘*babas*’, but written ‘*mpampas*’!

* * *

With all this Greek in mind, and with the idea of sound change stored on board for later use, we are now ready to depart ancient Greece and sail west. The Greeks’ adaptation of the alphabet was to prove very popular around the northern shores of the Mediterranean – or we should rather say, their adaptations. We are still a few centuries off from the emergence of one standard way of using the letters, not only in the shape and direction of the letters, but also what sound they stand for. For one example of this, see Chapter X.

The differences in the alphabet reflect the divisions within Greece in the classical era. It’s convenient for us to talk of ‘Greece’, as outsiders in space and time, and we can see all the commonalities in language, religion, technology and lifestyle that the ancient Greeks shared. For the people themselves, Greece would have felt very disunited. It was a broad region made up of numerous lands, islands, city states and peoples that only rarely got on. One such part was Euboea, a large island in the Aegean Sea, close to the mainland. As with many Greek states, this was a base from which the Euboeans ventured beyond their neighbourhood to explore, trade and settle.

Since it would have been unwise to head to the prosperous east and muscle in on the territory of the Phoenicians, the Greek gaze naturally looked westwards. So many famous cities today have their origins as Greek colonies: Marseille, Nice and Naples were known to the Greeks as *Massalía*, *Níkaia* and *Neápolis*. An obvious target, standing just over the Adriatic Sea, was Italy. In fact, the Greeks settled in the south of Italy to such an extent that the Romans would come to call the region ‘Great Greece’ (*Magna Graecia*), and some of the most famous individuals associated with ancient Greece lived there, like Pythagoras and Archimedes. Southern Italy maintained a distinctly Greek flavour for centuries.[19]

Setting out southwards from their island home, navigating the scattered islands of the Cyclades, following the coastline of the Peloponnese peninsula before steering west and out into the wide waters of the Ionian Sea, the Euboeans joined in the Greek colonisation of Italy. They took their alphabet with them. They most likely had no clue of the linguistic significance of their voyage, putting more pride in their ships than in their letters.

Through their presence on the island of Ischia and their founding of colonies like Cumae in the eighth century BCE, the Euboeans were the key nexus of contact between the Greek alphabet and the peoples of Iron Age Italy. These peoples included the inhabitants of a handful of hill settlements that overlooked the river Tiber. At this time, they were disunited and unimportant. We know these villages today as Rome.

C

Baldrick: I've done 'C' and 'D'.
Blackadder: Right. Let's have it, then.
Baldrick: Right. 'Big blue wobbly thing that mermaids live in.'
Blackadder: What's that?
Baldrick: 'C'.

~ *Blackadder III*: 'Ink and Incapability', 1987

Around the year 700 BCE, the alphabet disembarked onto the sandy shores of Italy. This Greek-borne gift was readily received by the ancient peoples of Italy. Thanks to the many surviving documents that they produced, we can appreciate the linguistic diversity of Italy in this early era. While these peoples caught the Greeks' enthusiasm for the modern technology of the written word, they did not share their language.

Exploring the role that they played in the formation of our alphabet is the task of this chapter. There is really no better letter to explore it with than the alphabet's third letter, C.

As with A and B, C can likewise trace its shape back to an Egyptian hieroglyph. Its curvaceous figure is more recent, though; its forebears were angular. It was originally an image of a simple bent stick, perhaps meant to be thrown like a boomerang.

In later Phoenician texts, the letter tends to be written ∧, with a greater bend, and in early Greek there is some variety. The Greeks could write it Γ, Λ or <. It was the final version, with a more familiar middle angle and arms of equal length, that was adopted by early Italian writers.

What about its sound, though? Here's where things get interesting. The Phoenician name for this letter was probably *giml*, a word probably meaning 'throwing stick'.[20] Everything in these ancient matters is always only probable. Nonetheless, the Phoenicians' letter was the source of the Greek letter Γ, called *gamma*.

Following the acrophonic principle, the use for these letters was for the consonant /g/, as in English *go* and *girl*. This is a **velar** sound, pronounced with the back of the tongue and the soft palate above. This is still the sound value of Hebrew ג and Greek Γ (in specific contexts) today. Yet this is not how it's used in English spelling, nor in other alphabets that descend from the Romans' writing, like French or German. For instance, C in *cut* stands for the consonant /k/, and in *city* for sibilant /s/. The reason for this is the route that the letter took through Italy. It was the work of the next in our cast of characters: the Etruscans.

In the year 700 BCE, Italy was a territory of a great many tongues, long since lost and usurped by Latin and its linguistic descendants. Some of these languages, such as Oscan and Umbrian, were in fact distantly related to the Greeks' own, and so would have had things in common. We can imagine moments of joyful recognition on a Mediterranean beach, as Greeks and Umbrians spotted how they had words like 'fire' (*pûr*/*pir*) and 'field' (*agrós*/*ager*) in common. These commonalities were possible because Greek and these ancient 'Italic' languages were distant cousins; they were members of the ever-widening family of Indo-European languages. However, there was also a great language of northern Italy that took on the Greeks' alphabet, but shared not one iota of linguistic kinship with their language. This was **Etruscan**.

Before there was Rome, there was the land of Etruria. The Etruscans constructed an impressive and influential civilisation across northern Italy, remnants of which you can still visit to this day. They built bustling towns, with high acropolises to worship their gods and low necropolises to honour their dead. They traded with or fought against the Greeks to the east and the Gauls to the north. Right at the southern edge of their Italian heartland was

Rome, and they exerted considerable influence over the young Roman state. They even gave Rome three of its seven kings before the Romans gave up on the idea of monarchy altogether in the sixth century BCE. As a result of this influence, like the Phoenicians, our historical sources for the Etruscans are a little skewed. They were the baddies in the Roman Republic's origin story, but the real relationship was undoubtedly more complicated. Even though their nation was doomed to be drowned in the coming flood of Romanity, the Etruscans have left their mark on modern Italy in its region of *Tuscany*.

The Etruscans used the alphabet to write down words and whole passages on their pots, statues and tombs. This means that today we have thousands of examples of the Etruscan language to get stuck into, some from surprising sources, like the wrappings of an Egyptian mummy. Some are long and detailed texts, like the one on this, the Cippus Perusinus, from Perugia, Italy, and dated to the late third or early second century BCE:

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However, all is far from clear. The Etruscan language remains to this day a fascinating yet frustrating enigma. Importantly, unlike the other Italian languages mentioned, it did *not* belong to the Indo-European family. In fact, for a while, Etruscan was commonly considered to be a linguistic orphan, without its own family, until work in the 1990s proposed a wider grouping of ‘Tyrrhenian’. This includes Etruscan and a couple of other scarcely documented ancient languages.[21]

Despite the abundance of written material, we lack both the family connections to understandable languages and the native speakers of Etruscan to tell us exactly what it all means. Reading Etruscan texts is therefore fraught with difficulty and labours under a mountain of educated guesses.

Context is one key for unlocking Etruscan. For instance, if a statue of a god bears a brief inscription of three words, one of those words is very likely the god's name, another the maker or donor of the statue, and another a verb meaning 'made' or 'gave'. Likewise, we have six-sided Etruscan dice, bearing short words like *zal* and *ci* – these must be the Etruscan numbers from one to six. We also have occasional references to Etruscan life and language by writers whose languages we do understand, like Latin. The Etruscans helpfully donated words to Latin, so we can assume that such words meant something similar in Etruscan. Some of these we English speakers have since acquired: if you have ever been to an *arena*, watched *satellite* television or seen a *person*, you know more Etruscan vocabulary than you might think.

One aspect of Etruscan that we don't have to worry about so much is its sounds. The Etruscans used the alphabet that the Greeks had brought, and because we know these letters well, we can be pretty confident about how to read (but not necessarily understand) Etruscan words. That said, the Etruscans put their own spin on the letters. Being a language completely unrelated to Greek, Oscan, Umbrian and Latin, there was no reason why Etruscan should have the same sounds as them, and why it should not modify the alphabet to suit its own phonetic needs.

One difference between Etruscan and its early Indo-European neighbours was in its consonants, and it was through this difference that our familiar letter C was born.

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Take your hand and put a finger on your voice box, as if to check your pulse. Now, say the sound /g/, as in *get*, repeatedly. You will notice that your voice box is vibrating as you stop and release the air-flow. You're producing a voiced consonant, one that includes this vocal-fold vibration. If you make its voiceless counterpart, /k/, as in *kit*, you won't feel the same vibration.

Unlike English, Latin and Greek, it seems that the Etruscan language did not include the voiced stop sounds /b/, /d/ and crucially /g/ among its phonetic building blocks. What this means for the story of C is that Etruscans were getting more letters from the Greeks than they needed. Since it did not have the sound /g/, Etruscan chose to repurpose the Greek letter gamma. The result was their letter <. This stood, still in third position, for a different yet similar sound that Etruscan did have: the voiceless

consonant /k/. In this reallocation of sound, we have the change in voicing that split our C from its sister letters, like Greek Γ and Hebrew ג. The latter two have remained voiced to this day, while the various sounds that C stands for in English spelling are at least united in voiceless-ness – test for yourself how you say the Cs in *cog*, *face* and *church*.

This Etruscan change to the sound of C is still reflected in our alphabet today, because our letters have never existed in a vacuum, but rather have been caught up in the political and social status quo of the day. For the next two centuries, the Etruscans were the dominant power in Italy, and so how they used the letter C had a certain prestige. If another nation with a different language had been top dog, or if the alphabet had arrived after the Etruscan decline, our C might still have the sound /g/, and our alphabet would seem closer to its Creek crandfather.

We can speculate, but the past cannot be changed. The Etruscans were especially powerful between 700 and 500 BCE, and so their culture was a prism through which our alphabet passed on its way to us.[22] In the shadow that they cast over Italy, the city of Rome spent its infancy.

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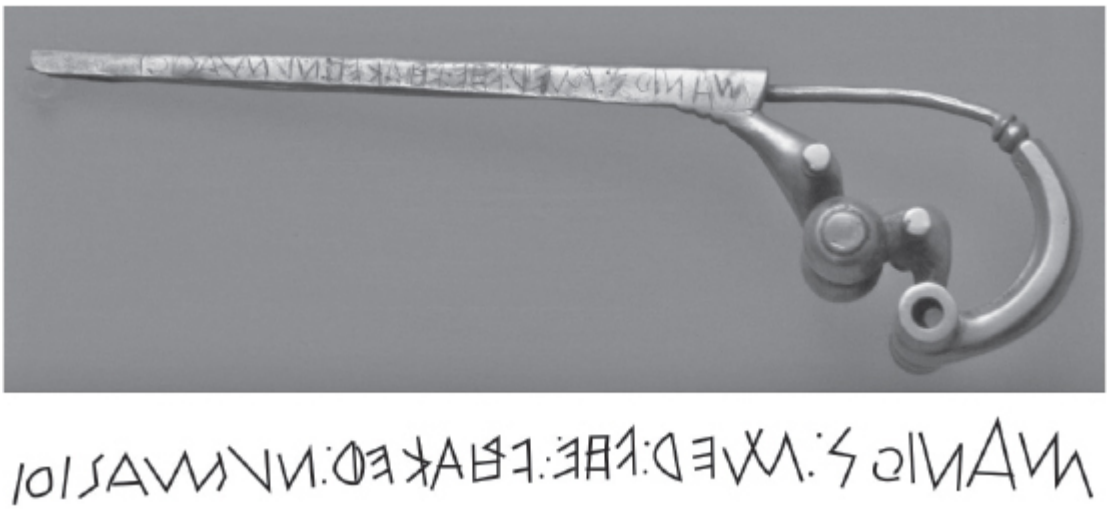
Latin – the language that has dominated the linguistic life of western Europe for two millennia, the language of science and technology, of education and scholarship, the international tongue that in turn spawned further global languages, like Spanish and French – gradually materialises in history in the seventh century BCE. Our earliest sources for Latin are rare archaeological finds, like pots and once-public inscriptions buried by later buildings. The oldest sample of Latin is borne by the Praeneste fibula, a gold brooch probably found in the city of Palestrina, east of Rome. If it's not a fake (experts have gone round and round on this issue), then our oldest sample of Latin, written from right to left, tells us that 'Manius made me for Numerius'.



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Both the language and the writing are very archaic: not only is the text written right to left, but the letters are angular. Most importantly, the writer completely followed Etruscan practices of spelling (see Chapter F). It was the Etruscans who held power and prestige at this ancient point in time, so non-Etruscan writers naturally copied their style. We are still a couple of centuries off from the familiar curved letters (like C) and the left-to-right direction that the Romans came to write with, but the essential ingredients are now in place.

What starts as a trickle of Latin becomes a torrent as the centuries progress and writing catches on among the Romans. The amount of written Latin that we have from the following centuries is immense. We have giant public proclamations, personal letters, mournful tombstones and pretty graphic graffiti. The Roman state roamed far beyond the banks of the Tiber, conquering first Italy, then all the lands around the Mediterranean, which the Romans thought of as *mare nostrum* (‘our sea’). Their campaigns and conquests spread written Latin over a vast area of Europe, Asia and Africa, leaving behind texts from Iraq to Scotland. Much of that writing is the recognisable style of square capital letters that we still use today.

▶ Description

We should bear in mind, though, that Latin was not the only written language of the Romans' empire. Latin literacy was successful in places without a strong existing tradition of writing, like Britain, but much less so in Greek-writing regions. Likewise, in northern Africa, in what is today Tunisia, the people of Carthage still spoke and wrote Punic, a linguistic descendant of Phoenician. Even after the Romans obliterated Carthage as an independent state, people in the area continued to speak Punic for centuries, as well as the invasive Latin. This bilingualism would lead to fascinating finds, like memorials inscribed in both Latin and Punic, which therefore display two cousin alphabets side by side.

Following the earliest days of the Latin alphabet, we see the Romans grow in alphabetic confidence. While our oldest sources like the Praeneste fibula are very much beholden to Etruscan standards, as Rome established itself and the Romans took control of Italy, they also took charge of the letters they had received. They tidied the alphabet up, and made it fit the phonetic needs of their language. It may also have been the Romans who renamed the letters.

So, we have now arrived in familiar territory. The letter C is curvy and pointed to the right. It stands for the sound /k/, as in *calm* and *clear*, and is being used throughout the Roman world to spell immortal names like *Caesar* and *Cicero*.

However, language does not like to stand still. It is constantly in flux, and each present generation of language users sows the seeds of future change. The previous paragraph made two claims: that C stood for the consonant /k/, and that it was present in the Romans' spelling of *Caesar* and *Cicero*. Yet I bet that, in your mind, you didn't read those two names with a hard /k/ sound, but rather with a hissing /s/, as if they were spelled '*Saesar*' and '*Sisero*'. No sooner had the Romans established control over the ancient alphabet, harmonising it with spoken Latin's needs, than speech changed again. The Latin language, by now becoming the mother tongue of millions, was destined to develop further. The sound of the letter C was caught up in those changes.

* * *

If you've been taught how to read written English – and I can safely assume that you have – you might have heard the terms 'soft C' and 'hard C'. These reflect the two most typical values for the letter C in English today, although other uses exist. A hard C can be found in words like *coconut*, *tarmac* and *suitcase*. Soft C is present in the spelling of *cigar, space* and *pronunciation*.

'Softness' and 'hardness' are not accurate phonetic qualities though, so we should be more precise. Soft C is the fricative sound /s/. Hard C is the stop sound /k/. We English readers have a really good grasp of when to say which of these two possible sounds of C, but for many of us, it's not a pattern that we can consciously explain. If I were to present you with the made-up English-looking words '*cib*' and '*cammy*', I bet you would pronounce them like '*sib*' and '*kammy*'. Yet you may not be able to tell me why.

Why then do we even have multiple sounds for the same letter C? The Romans did not. For people in Caesar's day, a C was always hard. True, we don't have ancient recordings from that time, so we cannot be certain, but all the evidence suggests that C was /k/. One source of that evidence is Latin vocabulary adopted into other languages, with their own systems of spelling. The Greeks took on a lot of Latin, and spelled C with their letter K. For instance, a famous rank of the Roman army is the *centurion*, a military term borrowed into Greek as κεντορίων (*kenturíōn*). *Caesar*, which started out as a family nickname, became an imperial title. It is the origin of the German word for 'emperor', *Kaiser*.

The split into hard and soft C therefore must have been a later development, in the first few centuries CE. It has its origins in another sound change, which shifted the consonant /k/ in some but not all instances. Understood in this light, the /k/ in words like *confirm* and *cavalier* is the older, 'original' way of saying C.

What determined when /k/ changed or did not change? What were the conditions? You can guess for yourself. If I lay out two groups of words all starting with C, divided into hard and soft pronunciation, what do the words in the soft C group have in common?

cab	*cease*
call	*cell*
canny	*central*
clue	*cerebral*
cob	*certain*
cold	*cinema*
crab	*city*
cuff	*civilised*
curtain	*cynical*

In the second column, we find soft C preceding the letters E, I and Y, just as it does with my made-up word *cib*. This is the key. It was the sound that followed /k/ that determined whether or not the consonant changed in later Latin. If /k/ preceded the vowels spelled A, O, U, or preceded another consonant, it did not shift. If /k/ preceded E, I and Y, it did.

Why those vowels, though? To understand the split, we have to get to grips with the fascinating and common phenomenon of **palatalisation**. This may be a long technical term, but it wears its meaning on its sleeve. Palatalisation is when a sound of speech, over generations, comes to be pronounced with the tongue and the hard palate – that is, the bony roof of your mouth.

It can be triggered when a consonant is followed by a vowel that is already pronounced there, such as /i/ (as in *sheep*). Making the consonant more like the vowel is efficient, really. It saves us time and energy to produce both sounds with the same parts of the mouth, rather than pushing

the tongue forward or pulling it back from some other place in time to pronounce the following vowel. This is palatalisation in a nutshell; we'll meet it several times in this book.

Those vowels for which the tongue is raised and forward in the mouth were able to cause this change, dragging the preceding consonant to the palate. These vowels were written by the Romans as I and E.[23] Consequently, it is these letters that we tend to find in English today after soft C.

Which sound /k/ shifted into differed across the Latin-speaking world. In France, it first became /t͡s/ (like in English *its*), and then later on /s/ in one linguistic descendant of Latin: French. This is the source of our soft C pronunciation. It is thanks to French spelling and the flood of vocabulary that the Normans started in 1066 that English now spells *city* and *centre* with a C.

Elsewhere, such as in Italy, /k/ has palatalised into a slightly different /t͡ʃ/ sound. This is the sound at the start of the English word *cheese*. Italian spelling consequently has the same hard/soft C split as English and French, but with a difference in the sound of soft C. Borrowed words like *cappuccino* nicely illustrate the two ways in which C is pronounced in Italian today.

It is therefore a completely natural change in the sounds of the later Latin language that can explain why C for many modern languages has more than one pronunciation. Latin, very much a living language at that time, underwent common processes like palatalisation. It's through such changes that new sounds, accents and even languages emerged out of Latin, even though the Romans would not have realised it at first.

The problem for spelling, though, is that the split into hard and soft C was a sound change that depended on context. Unlike the shift in Greek B, which changed across the board, it required the letter C to start spelling more than one sound. Such context-dependent changes in sound can stretch unchanged spelling to breaking point.

But why do we have the soft/hard C split? It's a fair question to ask. We writers of English are not Romans, and English is not a language that descends from Latin. So why do we not divide up the double duty of C, and have one letter for each sound? Since we have the perfectly practical letters

S and K, why not spell *city* and *corn* as ‘*sity*’ and ‘*korn*’? Or get rid of the letter C altogether?

To put it shortly but dramatically, Rome casts a long shadow. The importance of the Roman state for the subsequent history of Europe cannot be overstated. So much of the life of the European Middle Ages traded on its ancient prestige, with emperors, kings and popes each claiming to be somehow more Roman than the others. This culminated in the Renaissance, a movement that thought it could revive Roman-ness even better than the rest.

The respect for Rome continued into the modern era; great buildings like the United States Capitol owe both their style and their name to its architecture and politics. In societies that still build, govern and even speak like the Romans, it’s no surprise when people spell like them too. The spelling of English therefore has a backwards-looking quality, meaning that in many contexts we prefer to maintain Roman practices and spell according to a word’s history, not its sounds. This quality is a key theme of this book, and will crop up again. Upon reflection, it may seem ludicrous to you. Shouldn’t we spell how *we* speak, not how Cicero spoke two millennia ago? This is a fair criticism, but it doesn’t entirely condemn English spelling. Representing sound is not the only possible principle behind spelling, and, even with complicating rules like soft and hard C, you have nonetheless managed to read English successfully.

For now, we can depart from C and continue our whistle-stop tour through alphabetic history. Having alighted briefly in classical Rome, it’s now time to head off into Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. I can think of no better letter to guide us through these centuries than D.