

Writing

The earliest scripts, which pre-date the first alphabet, were Egyptian hieroglyphs ('sacred writing'), written in ink on papyrus scrolls or carved into stone, and Mesopotamian cuneiform, made by pressing the blunt end of a reed into a wet clay tablet. Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs were essentially pictograms that stood for words or sequences of consonants.

About 2000 BC the first alphabetic script, in which signs or glyphs were used to denote single consonants, was developed in central Egypt, probably so that Egyptian scribes could write down the language of Semitic slave labourers. This spread northwards and became extensively used in Phoenicia, which lay at the hub of a trade network linking west and east. Two key variations of the Phoenician alphabet that subsequently emerged were the Greek alphabet and the Aramaic. The modern Western alphabet is descended from the Greek, while the Aramaic, which became the official script of the Persian empire, is the forerunner of many Near Eastern alphabets.

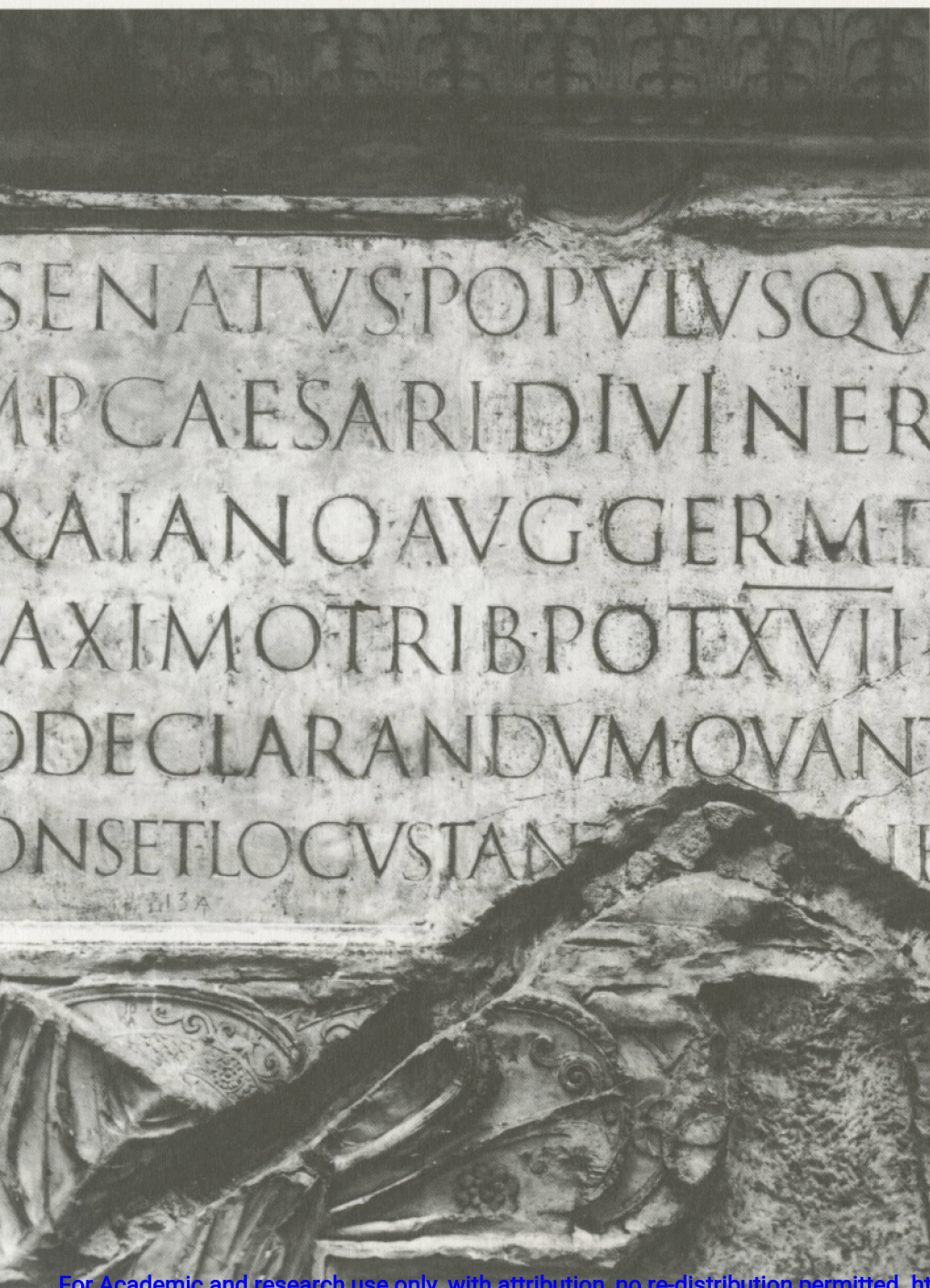
The pictorial origins of these early scripts are still evident in our alphabet. 'A' comes from a sign representing an ox's head – in Phoenician script what we would call an 'A' appeared on its side. 'T' comes from a sign used to represent a mark, which first appeared in Phoenician as X, while 'O' comes from a sign for an eye.

Writing began with the brush, the reed, the chisel and the pen, and reminders of these tools are also evident in letterforms. The Latin alphabet was composed exclusively of capital letters, or majuscules. Serifs are thought to have originated from the short incised feet with which Roman stone-carvers finished their austere and beautifully proportioned letters. Less formal capitals were used for writing on scrolls, and a cursive script produced by the impression of a stylus on a wax tablet was adopted for more casual types of written communication.

Right: The ninth century saw the development of the minuscule or lower-case letter. Carolingian script, which takes its name from the Emperor Charlemagne, was the standard book hand of Europe for the next 300 years. This example is taken from a ninth-century French manuscript.



READ
ME



Left and below: The finely carved letters on the base of Trajan's Column in Rome (completed AD 113) are often held up as models of form and proportion. Because the inscription would be read from below, the lower letters are slightly smaller than those above in order to retain an overall sense of balance.

After the Early Christian world adopted the Latin alphabet as the book hand for scribes, letterforms gradually changed. As parchment became more widely available and improved in quality and size, rounded capitals called uncials appeared, their curves reflecting a greater ease of writing in ink on a smooth surface. When books replaced scrolls, there was a shift from writing across a horizontal surface to writing in vertical columns, typically two per page to make the most of the available space. The subsequent emergence of the half-uncial, a compressed majuscule script with ascending and descending pen strokes, foreshadowed the development of miniscule letters.

The reign of Charlemagne (768–814) saw the further development of the miniscule, or lower-case letter, surrounded by its own white space. Carolingian script was the standard book hand of Europe right up until the twelfth century, when it was superseded by Gothic, or black-letter, script.

Throughout the Middle Ages, scribes were confined chiefly to monastic orders, copying sacred texts and embellishing them with illuminated letters and illustrations. It was laborious, painstaking work. Even with the emergence of the first universities, which were themselves a kind of religious community, books remained rare and extremely valuable, to the extent that they were often locked away or chained to lecterns.



By the fifteenth century, the radical movements of the Reformation and the Renaissance had created a new demand for books. The logical consequence of the Protestant Reformation, which challenged the authority of the clergy as interpreters of Christian scripture, was that lay people would require their own bibles. The Renaissance, which revived a notion of learning as enquiry, awakened a thirst for Classical texts and the knowledge they contained. What printing would soon unleash was the world's first communications explosion.