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Comparative Early Civilizations

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The Development of the Lesser Known Alphabets in European Cultures

The Indo-European language family is arguable the most influential language family in the history of the world. If one were to look at how this might be, it is possibly related to the development of the more accurate alphabet in Greece. Other alphabets developed from there, and that probably helped the Romans, which of course passed their alphabet to all of its successors. Eventually, all the colonial powers in Europe used the Roman alphabet, and passed their language and alphabet along with them when they conquered new lands. But what about the lesser known alphabets of Europe? How did they come to be and how did they come to die? I hope to address some of these issues in comparing the shape and development of European alphabets. There are several types of alphabets that were devised in Europe. It is possible to say that most language groups in Europe had their own system. The ones I wish to compare are the major families; Slavic, Italic, Hellenic (Greek), Celtic, and Germanic. I hope to compare these and their origins as a way of showing how early cultures treat, make, and used writing.

In Europe there were many different groups of people who developed many different languages from the parent language of Indo-European. However, there was not an alphabetic writing system until the Greeks developed it from

Phoenicia. The Phoenicians had developed a system of writing based on Proto-Sinaitic script which takes its influence directly from the Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs. The Phoenician system was strictly consonantal, meaning there were no written vowels. The Greeks were noted for being the first to write vowels in their alphabetic system. They adopted the symbols that were not in the Greek language and converted them into the vowels they needed. So there was a language that one could recite without prior knowledge of the context and without having prior experience of the word. As with most early scripts, the Greek one was nowhere near standardized. Many of the different city states, such as Athens, Argos, Corinth, Euboea and Ionia, had their own scripts which had their own distinguishing features, reflecting both dialect and possible cultural differences. Also, early Greek is believed to be a tonal language, the early forms of accents (acute, circumflex, etc) were representative of the Greek tonal system. Eventually the Ancient Greek language lost the tonal distinctions (at least as to the relevance to meaning) and became more standardized. The standard written form, such as the standard used for Modern Greek today, was based on the system from Ionia. This standardisation could help the Greek language accurately spread, and was passed down accordingly. Before standardisation though, the script made it to Italy.

The Etruscan script was the first script used for any Italic language. It is directly derived from one of the Greek scripts, namely Euboean. Several other languages under the Italic family were developed into scripts as well, all which were based originally on the Greek systems. The Etruscans often would spread their alphabet to their neighbors, which is why there are a lot of similarities

between the various Italic languages. These include Oscan, Venetic, Umbrian, Avellan, Banzian, Marsilianian, and Faliscian. These were all based on the Greek script, but adapted in some specific ways to help with the sounds that had existed in the Italic languages but not in the Greek. The fact that they used the Euboean form of Greek script is the reason why there are many symbols which do not represent the same phonetic symbol as their standard Ionic-Greek counterparts. Latin also had a heavy connection with Etruscan, and the result in the Latin alphabet is obvious. These can be seen with several letters such as Γ (ghamma) in standard Ionia, but Ϙ in Euboean which is where we get the letter C in the Latin/Etruscan alphabets, or instead of the Ionic Σ, we have Ϛ in Euboean, from which we get S. The Ionic Greek symbol Ξ is quite different than its counterpart of Χ in Euboean, which is related to the letter X in Latin/Etruscan. These are examples of how the Euboean Greek alphabet influenced the Italic alphabetic systems, with the ultimate result of the Latin alphabet, being the most commonly used in the world today (this paper is also in the Latin alphabet).

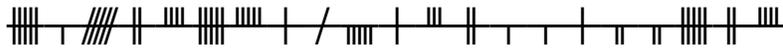
The Italic family included many languages, but once the Roman Empire used the Latin language and alphabet, they took it and made the primary language and writing system across the Empire. This in turn led to the Roman Alphabet being used by non-literate people who encountered the Romans, to write their language as well. One of the biggest factors for the quick spread of the Roman alphabet was religion. Since Christianity had reached the Roman Empire fairly early, the Roman Empire was able to spread the religion, and with it, the Latin language and alphabet. Latin was a well known lingua franca of the

days of the Romans and afterwards, because of the widespread use of it in religion. Its successor, French (the actual lingua franca), also used this alphabet. Although the Greeks became Orthodox Christians themselves, they did not have a large empire in which to spread the Greek language, alphabet, and religion.

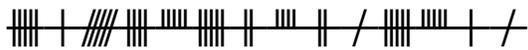
However, some areas developed their own alphabet, based on the Greek and Roman scripts, such as the development of the Cyrillic and Glagolitic alphabets in the Slavic speaking areas. The Glagolitic alphabet was believed to be devised in the 9th century by St. Cyril, whose name was lent to the name Cyrillic (though he had no direct hand in creating it). The Glagolitic alphabet was more complex and eventually was dropped out in favor of the Cyrillic form, which was simpler and more practical for usage in the church. The Slavic writing system was useful for spreading religion, similar to the Latin, and Old Church Slavonic because somewhat of a lingua franca of the Slavic world. The influence from Greek can be seen immediately in the Cyrillic alphabet. Examples might be Г, Ф, Р, П, Х, В, Н, Т, Е, М, К are all pronounced roughly the same way in both scripts (these are today pronounced /g/~ɣ/, /f/, /r/, /p/, /χ/, /e/, /t/, /ɛ/, /m/, /n/, k/ respectively).

Others, such as the Celtic people in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, write in a script known as Ogham, which may or may not have been of their own invention. This was a system that was usually written on wood, but most of those texts were lost, and the only surviving ones we have, in Old Irish, Old Welsh, Old Scottish Gaelic, Manx, and other Celtic, are engraved in stone. There is no known origin of the Ogham script, but there are theories stating that it had come

out of tallying and keeping accounts for trade and law. The script is based around a central line, of which lines protrude out (somewhat similar to the Devanāgarī alphabet used for Sanskrit and Hindi). A sample is as follows:



i b r o c i q a m s a t o b b a l l i o c coillabbotas maqi corbi



i a r e q i o c o m i q a m

Maqi mocoli Qerai

= Coillabbotas, son of Corb Son of the Qerai (Kerry) tribe.

(Ancient Sripis: Ogham)

Ogham is stranger than any other alphabetic system in Europe, and cannot be traced back to Greek, Phoenician, or Egyptian. It was also later used to write in the language of invading hordes of Vikings, in the language of Old Norse. It is believed that some of the uses of the Ogham alphabet are similar to the encoding of the Runic alphabet of the Germanic peoples.

The Germanic peoples of Northern Europe had their own form of writing, with an alphabet known as Futhark**, and it was written in letters known as Runes. The Runic alphabet was by no means standardised, and in fact it had had several stages of its development and was never very concrete amongst the nations that used it. The interesting thing about the Runic alphabets are how some of their letters seem to have roots in the Roman and Greek alphabets. Although it is true that not all the letters are the same and some look completely original, others do seem to stem from the same root. This alphabet began in

** The name Futhark comes from the first 5 letters of the Runic alphabet:  = f u t h a r k. This is similar to the word Alphabet, which comes the Greek names AB, Alpha Beta.

This is basically the predecessor to Old Norse, and a direct offshoot of Proto-Germanic, the common ancestor of all Germanic languages. A cultural note about the alphabet might be that each letter represented another item, such as a god, animal, weather, amongst other things. Interestingly the symbol \Uparrow , which was representative of the War-God Tyr, has been often seen mixed with \mathfrak{F} which represented god, to make a good luck charm for war and for the afterlife (Spurkland 16). Most inscriptions were in memorial for the dead, where only part of the time were they actual gravestones. Other inscriptions have been found on the oars of ships, on whetstones, coins, brooches, knives, spearheads, looted treasures, etc.

When Proto-Scandinavian shifted into Old Norse, and the alphabet also shifted in a very unpredictable way. As it shifted, and gained more vowel sounds, and *lost* several letters from the alphabet. Its sister runic system in England, the Anglo-Saxon or Old English Futhorc[↓] also had a language shift, but the runic alphabet *added* more letters, and it would make more sense for that to happen. However, during the Viking age, when Old Norse became the standard language of Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, it was written with two alphabets, the Latin one, especially towards the end of the Viking era (when they were becoming Christianised), and the Younger Futhark, which had be a simplified version of the Elder Futhark. For one thing, most all letters became one stemmed, or they only had one line that goes vertically, whereas the lines

[↓] It is true that English used to use a Runic alphabet with around 33 letters.

connected to this stem. Sounds like /b, p/ were represented by one letter ᚼ, and /g, k/ were both represented by ᚷ. The sounds /d, t/ were represented by ᚠ and ᚦ, and /e, i/ were represented by ᚢ. The letters and language differed from region to region as well as through the different ages it was written. This is where we first see a separation of the two major dialects of Old Norse into East Norse and West Norse, the former becoming modern day Danish and Swedish and the latter becoming modern Icelandic and Norwegian.

In the High Middle Ages, the Runic alphabet was again molded, only this time to accommodate the sounds that it had once lumped together during the Viking age, they added dots to help separate different sounds which were represented by the same letter. So /b/ and /p/ became ᚼ and ᚷ respectively, as did /d/ and /t/ become ᚠ and ᚦ. /i/ and /e/ became ᚢ and ᚦ, and then /g/ and /k/ became ᚷ and ᚷ. The use of the dots would help to distinguish quite a few sounds in runic, and it was continuously used until it was completely replaced by the Latin alphabet in most cases by 1500 CE.

In comparison, I noticed many similarities between the different early scripts. For one, I noticed that all the earliest scripts, mostly those of Ogham, Greek, Italic, and Runic involve mostly straight lines. It has been suggested that this might have to do with the ease of carving, say carving a design into wood or stone with a knife. When the development of different kinds of carving or writing came about, then some of them developed more rounded letters, such as Latin

and Greek (Cyrillic started out on paper so it never had any issues), or later Runic inscriptions that were painted. There is also a tendency towards using the stone tablets to be memorials for people who have passed. In Runic inscriptions, they were known for writing it as “X, *Child* of Z, raised this stone for Y” (such as in Appendix A). This was common in some Ogham stone inscriptions as well. The most interesting is that some of more basic uses for these scripts was for a form of graffiti. It is known that Roman was well known for graffiti, and in fact our knowledge of Vulgar Latin stems directly from that. Quite a few Runic and Ogham designs follow a formula of “X was here!” or “X carved these runes.” This might show a bit of the cultures that these European people had.

The direction in which the letters are read is also important to which way the letters face, and thusly how they appear. Runic for one, was read right to left or left to right. Early Latin inscriptions as well as Venetic, Etruscan, and Oscan could also be read both way, depending on which way the letters face. Early Greek resembled its predecessor of Phoenician in that it would normally be read right to left, but later it would be read left to right. Greek and Runic were both known for something known as Boustrophedon or “Ox turning while ploughing” (Spurkland 8). This is directional technique where the direction the inscription is read would change every line. It would be like reading the first line from right to left, and while your eyes are there on the left, you start from left to right, and then when you finish that line, you go from right to left on the next. This connection seems to point to a connection between these two types of writing.

If we look at certain letters, we see connections and similarities, except in the case of Ogham, whose writing system has no known connection to any

other European script. An example would be the Venetic Γ (L) which when read right to left looks like \perp which would be the same symbols in Runic, depending on which direction the script is read. Another might be the letter \diamond whose equivalent is X in the runic script, but both represent the sound /o/.

There are countless other examples, where several letters match in both the Italic and Runic systems, which may mean that they both are influenced by Greek, or that one came from the other, namely Runic stemmed from an Italic script, which in turn stemmed from Greek.

The European alphabet has conquered the world. Although, it is rooted in Egypt, the Greek and Roman writing systems do not resemble their ancestors. It seems that the lives of the other forms of alphabetic writing, even in languages related to Latin and Greek, have lost their alphabet in favor of another. However, in comparing and looking at these various alphabets, we learn more about the people who once used them, and how they might be connected to each other.

Appendix A: a Sample of a Danish Runic inscription from Asferg

ÞNRÞH 1NK† HNT RHYPI HHT ÞÞTH
 Þurgir :tuka:sun:risþi:stin:þãnsi:
 IÞ1IR YNT† BRNÞR HHT *IRÞÞ KNRN ÞIT
 iftir: mula :brupr :sin: harþã: kupru: þin

Thurgir, Tuka's son (or son of Tuka), raised stone this (this stone)

After (In memory of) Mula, brother his (his brother), (a) very good man (warrior)

Translation by Timothy Snyder

Appendix B: Ogham

Beithe birch b	Luis blaze/herb l	Fern alder f	Sail willow s	Nion fork/loft n	Uath fear(?) h	Dair oak d	Tinne rod/metal t	Coll hazel c	Ceirt bush q
Muin neck m	Gort field g	nGéatal wounding(?) ng	Straif sulphur z	Ruis red(ness) r	Ailm ? a	Onn ash-tree o	Úr earth u	Eadhadh ? e	Iodhadh ? i
Éabhadh ? ea	Ór gold oi	Uilleann elbow ui	Ifín pine ia	Eamhancholl double c ae	Peith soft birch p	Eite feather	Spás space	Eite thuathail reversed feather	

Appendix C: Runic Scripts

Elder

							
f	u	þ	a	r	k	g	w
fehu wealth	ūruz aurochs	þurisaz giant	ansuz god	raipō riding	kaunaz ulcer	gebō gift	wunjō joy
							
h	n	i	j	ī	p	z	s
hagalaz hail	naupiz need/hardship	isa ice	jera year/harvest	eihwaz yew tree	perþ luck	algiz sedge (?)	sōwulō sun
							
t	b	e	m	l	ng	d	o
teiwaz the god Tyr	berkana birch twig	ehwaz horse	mannaz man	laguz water	inguz the god Ing	ḏagaz day	ōþila inherited land

Danish

															
f	u	þ	ǰ	r	k	h	n	i	a	s	t	b	m	l	R

Norwegian

															
f	u	þ	ǰ	r	k	h	n	i	a	s	t	b	m	l	R

Swedish

															
f	u	þ	ǰ	r	k	h	n	i	a	s	t	b	m	l	R

Medieval

															
a	b	c	d	e	f, v	g	h, x	i, j	k	l	m	n	o	p	kw
															
r	s	t	θ, ð	u, w	y	z	æ	ø							

Appendix D: Chart of Etruscan, standard Latin, and Euboean Greek

Euboean Greek	Model Etruscan	Archaic Etruscan	Late Etruscan	Latin	Phonetic Value
ΑΑ	Α	Α	Α	A	[a]
Β	Β			B	[b]
<C	Γ)	⊃	C G	[k]
Δ	Δ			D	[d]
ΕΕ	Ε	Ε	Ε	E	[e]
Ϝ	Ϝ	Ϝ	Ϝ	F	[w]
Ι	Ι	Ι	ϜϜ	(Z)	[z]
ΗΗ	Η	Η	ΗΘ	H	[h]
⊕⊗⊙	⊗	⊗⊙	⊙⊙		[tʰ]
Ι	Ι	Ι	Ι	I	[i]
Κ	Κ	Κ		K	[k]
Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	L	[l]
ΜΜ	Μ	Μ	Μ	M	[m]
ΝΝ	Ν	Ν	Ν	N	[n]
Ξ	Ξ				[s]
Ο	Ο			O	[o]
Π	Π	Π	Π	P	[p]
Μ	Μ	Μ	Μ		[ʃ]
Ϙ	Ϙ	Ϙ		Q	[q]
Ρ	Ρ	Ρ	Δ	R	[r]
Σ	Σ	Σ	Σ	S	[s]
Τ	Τ	Τ	ϜϜ	T	[t]
ΥΥΥ	Υ	Υ	Υ	V	[u]
Χ	Χ	Χ			[ks]
Φ⊕	Φ	Φ	⊕		[pʰ]
ΥΨ	Υ	Υ	Ψ		[kʰ]
		(Ϝ8)	8		[f]

Appendix E: Venetic

𐀀	𐀁	[a]	𐀂	[p]
𐀃		[d]	𐀄 𐀅	[ś]
𐀆		[e]	𐀇 𐀈	[r]
𐀉		[v]	𐀊	[s]
𐀋 𐀌	𐀍	[h]	𐀎 𐀏	[t]
𐀐		[i]	𐀑	[u]
𐀒 𐀓	𐀔	[y]	𐀕 𐀖	[b]
𐀗		[k]	𐀘	[g]
𐀙 𐀚	𐀛	[l]	𐀜 𐀝	[o]
𐀞		[m]	𐀟	[θ]
𐀠		[n]	𐀡 𐀢 𐀣	[f]

Appendix F: Oscan

𐌆	a [a]	𐌇	h [x]	𐌈	r [r]
𐌉	b [b]	𐌊	i [i]	𐌋	s [s]
𐌌	g [g]	𐌍	k [k]	𐌎	t [t]
𐌏	d [d]	𐌐	l [l]	𐌑	u [u]
𐌒	e [e]	𐌓	m [m]	𐌔	f [f]
𐌕	v [v]	𐌖	n [n]	𐌗	í [i:]
𐌘	z [dz]	𐌙	p [p]	𐌚	ú [u:]

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It should be noted that the Runic and Ogham charts come from this site, as well as some background info

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