Your Alphabet or Mine?

Writing Old English in two alphabets

English has been written in the **roman alphabet** for well over a thousand years. However, Old English—the earliest form of English, spoken from approximately the 5th to the 12th century AD—was initially written only in the **runic alphabet**, the indigenous alphabet of the Old English-speaking population of England. The letters of the runic alphabet were angular and designed for carving on hard surfaces.

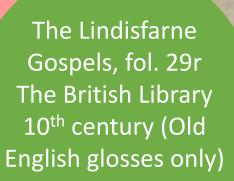


The Loveden Hill urn inscription by Bengt Odenstedt (in Hines 1990: 443)





- ♦ When missionary activity to the English began at the turn of the 7th century, missionaries brought with them Christianity and learning in a wide array of subjects. The language of this new literacy was Latin, written in the roman alphabet. The missionaries also introduced manuscript culture.
- ◆ As the English began to produce manuscripts of their own, they adopted the roman alphabet for recording Old English, since it was better suited for manuscripts. The curved lines of many letters were ideal for writing quickly and efficiently on parchment with ink.



Was the runic alphabet completely discarded?

- ◆ The use of the runic alphabet continued for **centuries** after the adoption of the roman alphabet.
- ♦ With some small exceptions, the runic alphabet remained restricted to inscriptions and was not used in manuscripts. The roman alphabet was used in both manuscripts and some inscriptions.
- ◆ From the adoption of the roman alphabet to the end of the Old English period in the 12th century, Old English was biscriptal—a language with two alphabets.



Select bibliography and further reading

Hines, J. 1990. 'The Runic Inscriptions of Early Anglo-Saxon England', in *Britain 400-600: Language and History*, ed. by A. Bammesberger and A. Wollmann (Carl Winter Universitätsverlag), pp. 437-455

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