

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)



The Loveden Hill urn
The British Museum
5th century



The Lindisfarne
Gospels, fol. 29r
The British Library
10th century (Old
English glosses only)

Why was the roman alphabet adopted?

- ◆ 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.



The Bristol agate ring
The British Museum
7th-10th century

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

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