History of English Scripts

Preliminary - Roman Scripts

Square Capitals.

The earliest Roman script, to judge from inscriptions, was entirely of capitals, the most formal variety of which was known as square capitals (capitalis quadrata), especially suitable for carving on stone, and seen in perfected form in the famous example of Trojan's column, erected A.D. 114. Square capitals provide a good illustration of the cyclic history of Western handwriting and of its Roman origins, since they have virtually the same form as modern block capitals.

Rustic Capitals.

Square capitals were laborious t write, and for more general purposes the less formal rustic capitals (capitalis rustics) were used, being more swiftly and easily formed and, written with a reed pen, especially suitable for papyrus and parchment. They were somewhat narrower than square capitais, angular and with free use of broken strokes and long foot- serifs, particularly noticeable on E and F (which are thereby easily confused), and I, P, T (looking like I.

Cursive Script

In addition to the capitals there was a cursive script in use from quite early times, as evidenced by the Pompeii inscriptions. A simple elongated script basically dependent on straight lines, it was particularly useful for writing on wax tablets. It had considerable influence on the development of other Roman scripts, as well as providing early models for minuscules, including d, f, h, m. n, r, and long s.

Uncial Script.

Until about the 5th century A.D. capitals were used for book hand, but later they were reserved mainly for headings and display. The new book hand was uncial script, developed by the law and school books and influenced by cursive. Uncial was still a majuscule script, and several of its letters (e.g. B, C, 0, R, S ) were almost the same as the capitals. However, in some respects it might be considered a transitional script from capitals to minuscules. Most of the letter s are rounded, and while they are contained within parallel lines there is no longer a complete commitment to making the bodies the same height as the columns, and there are intralinear tails.

Half-Uncial Script.

A further step towards minuscule was the development of a more cursive script than uncial, known as half-uncial (semi-uncialis) examples of which can be found as early as the 5th century in Italy and France. Its main differences from uncial are a with a rounded bowl, b with a single bowl, d with an upright stem, f with an intralinear stem, g with a flat-topped open head, r with a stem and right shoulder like its modern counterpart, long-stemmed s and t with a curved shank.

English Scripts.

Anglo-Saxon Scripts

Discounting the period of Roman occupation, from which no examples survive, England had from its early days of Christianity two main book hand scripts, both brought by the missionaries, one from the north, the other from the south. The first of these was the uncial in its Roman form, fostered by the arrival of St Augustine in Kent in 597 and the development of a school of writing at Canterbury and other monastic centres.

The second script is based on the Roman half-uncial as adopted and developed bv the Irish after their conversion by St Patrick in the 5th century. Known as Irish insular script it is seen in its perfect ed form in the Book of Kells (c. 8th century).

Insular Script

A somewhat confusing variety of names has been applied to insular script in England, including Irish, scriptura Scottica, scriptura Saxonica and Hiberno-Saxon, though the commonest is Anglo-Saxon. Like its Irish parent, the Insular or Anglo-Saxon script had two main forms. The first and earlier, termed half-uncial or majuscule, is a rounded, rather fat hand with spade-like serifs.

By about the 7th century a more cursive, thinner and more angular script developed which with its full range of linear, supralinear and intralinear letters is genuinely minuscule and is known as Insular or Anglo-Saxon minuscule. This was to become the predominant script for vernacular manuscripts until well into the II th century. For vernacular usage graphs had to be added for the sounds for which there was no equivalent in Latin. One source for these was the Runic alphabet, still current in the Anglo-saxon period, used for carving on stone, wood and other materials. For instance on the Franks Casket. The Runic graph thorn þ - was used for the sounds expressed in Modern English by - th - ; its use lasted till the end of the 15th C., although in its later period the top of the shaft often disappeared making it hard to distinguish from Y - hence Ye Olde Tea Shoppe signs.

Another borrowed Rune was wyn (OE = joy) - p - employed for w. It tended to be confused with y or thorn and uu, double-u which had been used in early OE writing, replaced it after the Norman Conquest. The Latin digraph æ which originally represented a dipthong in Latin and which did not exist in English, was adopted to represent the sound described in the Runic alphabet as aesc (ash) - Æ or æ - a [back vowel sound]. Also to be noted is the adoption of the flat-topped g of the miniscule - Z- to be used for a variety of palatal and spirant sounds.

Carolignian Script

In the 8th C. a major reform of handwriting occurred under the general patronage of Charlemagne (742-814). It resulted in the development of a hand both easy to write and to read, combining clarity of uncial with some of the swiftness of cursive. It derived its models from diverse sources so that many scripts influenced the development of Carolignian Miniscule.

Charlemagne sent for the English scholar Alcuin of York to run his palace school and scriptorium at his capital, Aachen. The revolutionary character of the Carolingian reform cannot be over-emphasized; efforts at taming the crabbed Merovingian and Germanic hands had been under way before Alcuin arrived at Aachen, where he was master from 782 to 796, with a two-year break. The new minuscule was disseminated first from Aachen, and later from the influential scriptorium at Tours, France, where Alcuin "retired" as an abbot. Wiki: Carolingian minuscule.

One should note the folowing features: a with a small bowl and high stem - to prevent confusion between open a and u which was a danger with other minscule scripts - occassional d with angled back and t with a capital cross-bar and curved shank. It became virtually the only script for Latin mss, with Roman capitals and uncials only used for display and versals.

Early Gothic

The next devlopment - one which was limited to countries north of the alps - was the gradual alteration of Carolingnian minscule from a rounded to an angular hand, a kind of parallel with gothic architecture. The reasons for its development, apart from symapthy with gothic architecture, are a desire to save space and the use of an oblique nib. The resultant script became known as Gothic, a general title given to all post-12th C mediaeval hands. In its primitive form it still showed an affinity to Carolingnian. With the establishing of gothic script, Roman capitals gave way to uncials, which were adapted to the angularity of the miniscule by elongation, broken strokes, reinforcing lines and in the later, more cursive hands, further adornments like cusps, spurs and lozenges.

Later Textura Scripts

By the late 12th C there came a parting of the ways between formal book-hands, now known as text (textura) and the documentary hands and there was a growth of a hierarchy of scripts adapted to purpose and degree of urgency. This was understandable since text was an elaborate and laborious script to use, and even within bookhands less formal and more swiftly written hands were used for glosses and notes. By the end of the 13th C the cursive hands evolved for literary purposes too, and were fully developed by the time of Chaucer. From Chaucer's time (late 14th C.) the to the death of Skelton (1529) the main scripts for English literary works are text, the two cursives called anglicana and secretary, and amalgams of text and cursive known as hybrid or bastard script.

Anglicana.

The chief literary cursive hand at the time of Chaucer was Anglicana. Though it was probably imported in its earliest form from France, it has been given the name anglicana because of its widespread and distinctively English use. It first appeared in England in the 12th century as a correspondence hand, and was in general use by the end of the 13th century: it predominated until close on the middle of the beginning of the 15th century, and survived in a degenerate cursive form until the 16th century.

Among the many modifications of anglicana in the 14th century was the development of Formata grade, based partly on textura from which it acquired a squatter and squarer appearance, some broken strokes and hooked serifs. It employed thicker and more angled pen strokes than for normal anglicana and its ascenders were somewhat taller and usually arched. The graphs were not otherwise different except that a diamond-shaped form of small capital S was used in final position and the use of the circular e was usually limited to a type of ligatured re. At its best, it was a comely though rather congested script, and it is understandable that it held sway as a formal book hand for most of the first half of the 15th century.

**[Cutting the Pen]**

Later English Scripts.

Secretary Script

No sooner was anglicana at its height than it was challenged by another cursive script as the general-purpose documentary and book hand below the class of formata. Though the earliest forms of secretary seem to have originated in Italy, it was a direct importation from France during the reign of Richard II, and is found in Chancery warrants in the 1370s. It steadily grew in popularity and was widespread by the middle of the 15th century. It is a much more angular hand than anglicana, which looks quite rounded by comparison, being written with an angled nib with a studied contrast of thick and thin strokes.

It is a much more variable hand than anglicana with respect to size, slope and range of graphs. Though more angular than anglicana, secretary could be written rather more swiftly, and effected a greater cursiveness by a large number of diagonal links, some of which are so faint as to be almost invisible. It never attained a formata grade which could rival anglicana formata, but none the less achieved a degree of elegance combined with compactness to provide a very serviceable quasi-formal book hand.

Hybrid scripts

As often happens when two or more distinctive scripts are current, secretary and anglicana often borrowed from one another in features of general style and in use of graphs. Both scripts became combined with textura to form what are now known chiefly as hybrid scripts, though the term bastard (bastarda) is still prevalent, being derived from the practitioners themselves.

Hybrid anglicana developed in the middle of the 14th century, and was perfected by the beginning of the 15th century. Its basic difference from anglicana was that it was slightly larger, more liberally spaced and often employed the quadrata or semi-quadrata system of serifs. Somewhat easier to write than textura formata, it occurs in deluxe manuscripts and is used for display purposes in others where anglicana formata is the basic script.

Attempts by 15th century scriveners to upgrade secretary resulted in several forms of hybrid secretary both in England and on the Continent, one French and German variety being known as brevitura.

With the advent of printing in England, a few years before the birth of More, and with changes in taste brought about by humanism, gothic text gradually fell into disuse in literary manuscripts, but it did not entirely disappear, being especially popular for display, and was still being taught by the writing-masters towards the end of the 16th century. Elaborate specimens are provided in the main Elizabethan copybooks, for example, de Beauchesne and Baildon, A booke containing divers sortes of hands, 1570, and the anonymous A newe booke of copies, 1574.

The hybrid secretary hand was far more popular than textura and occurs quite frequently in the more formal manuscripts. It was of special service in works divided into text, translation and commentary and therefore requiring differentiation and levels of formality of script.

With the advent of printing, and the end of the middle ages, we come to the end of our History of English Scripts - although handwriting of course did continue to develop right up to the present day. But it was no longer a vital part in the production of books and many other of the documents produced over the later period.

Roman Hands before A.D. 600)

Uncial Hands A.D. 200-1000)

Carolingian Hands A.D. 600-1200)

Gothic Textus Hands A.D. 1200-1500)

Gothic Bastard Hands A.D. 1300-1900)

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