

# FINDING THE RIGHT LETTERS: THE ORIGINS OF THE EARLIEST ENGLISH ALPHABET<sup>1)</sup>

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The present paper explores the origins in the seventh century of the Old English alphabet. It first surveys the different vernacular alphabets that would have been available as potential models or influences, Runic, Frankish, British (Welsh), and Irish—as well as the Latin alphabet. It then argues for the particular role of the Irish and their alphabet in the formation of the Old English alphabet and its script.

keywords: BRYTHONIC, DONATUS, FRANKISH, INSULAR MINUSCULE, RUNIC.

The development of the English language from its humble origins as a West Germanic dialect to its dominant status as the international *lingua franca* of modern times can be traced in manuscripts and books covering thirteen centuries of English (from *c.* 700). This extraordinarily detailed record was made possible by the alphabetization of English, a process which was already under way in the early seventh century. At that time the Anglo-Saxon settlers of the island of Britain had carved out most of the area which would become known as England (OE *Englaland*, ‘the land of the Angles’). By the middle of the seventh century these same people were well on the way to becoming a Christian society, thanks to a two-pronged mission of Romans in the south-east of England (based at Canterbury) and Irish in the north (based on Lindisfarne Island). In making their accommodation with Christianity, the Anglo-Saxons acquired literacy first in Latin and subsequently in their vernacular, Old English.

Western Christianity was a literate religion based on the reading and study of the Bible in Latin,

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1) This paper was read at a symposium (October 22, 2011) to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of the Institute of Oriental and Occidental Studies, Kansai University. I wish to thank the organizers of the symposium for inviting me to participate.

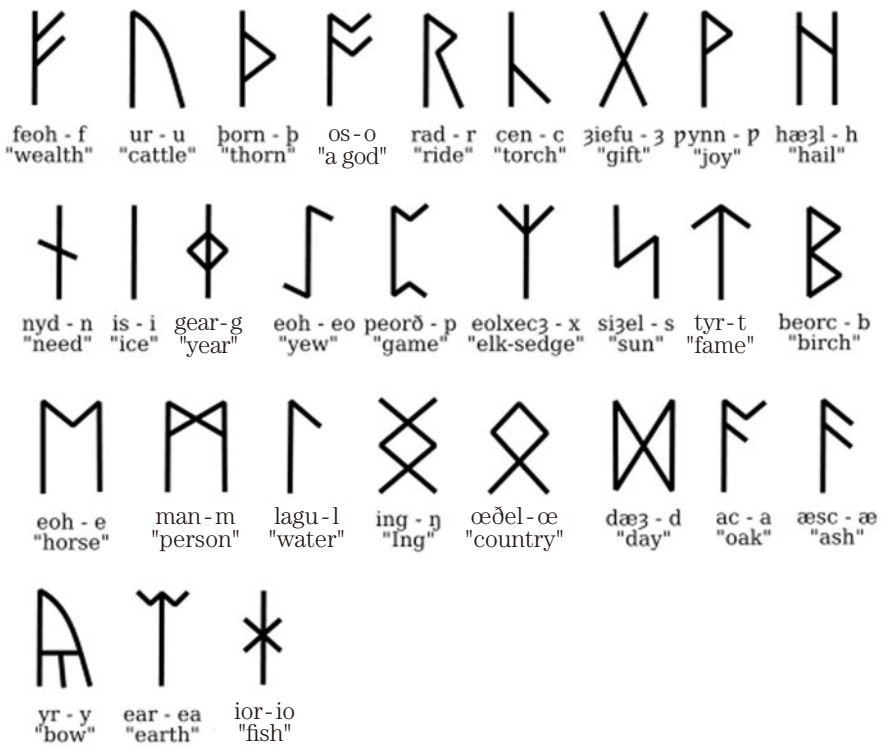
the same language which it used for all its rituals. In a missionary situation the Bible could of course be taught orally, translated from Latin into the vernacular—as indeed was done by the first missionaries from Rome to Kent who used Frankish translators to convey their message. But since these first missionary teachers and translators had to be brought in from outside, and a steady supply could not be guaranteed, the need to train a native clergy was obvious from the beginning. In effect, that meant teaching them to read and write in Latin so that they could study the texts of the new religion. Thus, literacy in Anglo-Saxon England originated in an immediate pastoral need for a native clergy. It must be stressed that we are talking here about literacy in Latin, confined to a Christian elite of clergy and monks.

By the late seventh century it is clear that the same Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastical elite was writing not only in Latin but also in their vernacular. Although this transference of the technology of literacy from one language (Latin) to another (English) might seem the most natural thing in the world, the first does not necessarily lead to the second. Many early medieval societies had Latin literacy but not a written vernacular. This was especially the case in Romance-speaking areas where the difference between Christian Latin and the spoken vernacular was one of register rather than language. But even in the Christianized Germanic-speaking areas of the Continent such as northern Italy and Francia, the vernacular was not generally written. And closer to home, there was the example of Celtic Britain which had a literate Latin culture side by side with an even more vigorous native literary (mainly poetic) tradition that seems to have remained essentially oral until the ninth century.

The leap from Latin to English literacy raises two fundamental questions: why and how? One could make many suggestions about why the Anglo-Saxons adopted literacy in the vernacular; for example, to commemorate deceased clerics by writing down their native names; to record transactions of land identified by native names; and to provide vernacular translations of Latin words, what we call 'glosses'. But we are on firmer ground in attempting to answer the second question of how they mastered literacy in the vernacular by creating an alphabet designed for writing English. *Prima facie* they were certainly well positioned (in both the literal and figurative sense) for such an endeavor, since they were now under the cultural umbrella of Roman Christianity and at the same time surrounded by neighbours who had been literate for centuries (notably, the British, the Irish, and the Franks). Thus, in theory they had available to them an enviable choice of models for an alphabet.

Moreover, the Anglo-Saxons already possessed a native alphabet called Runic which they had

brought with them from their continental Germanic home. This alphabet (*futhork*), a set of 24 symbols of uncertain date and origin, was carved on wood, bone, metal and stone. Over time the Anglo-Saxons modified this alphabet (mainly by additions) to reflect linguistic changes in Old English. The modified Anglo-Saxon runic alphabet which had 29-34 letters (the *futhorc*) was, in the words of Bruce Dickins, ‘vastly superior as an instrument for recording the sounds of Old English...to the Latin alphabet’. Although often thought of as restricted to monumental inscriptions, runes from Anglo-Saxon England were used for a variety of other purposes, notably ‘practical correspondence and general use’, and ‘witchcraft’.



[Adapted from Wikipedia, ‘Anglo-Saxon runes’]

Given its intrinsic orthographical advantages, why was runic not adopted as the official alphabet for writing Old English? According to one explanation, the alphabet’s old associations with paganism made it unsuitable in the eyes of the practitioners of the new religion, Christianity. But this explanation does not hold up since we know that runes appear in manuscripts all through the Anglo-

Saxon period (approximately, A.D. 700–1100); moreover, they are found on Christian objects such as the Franks Casket and the coffin of St Cuthbert (died 695). The most plausible explanation is that Runic was in origin an inscriptional alphabet, whose characteristically straight lines made it very suitable for carving on wood and stone; but this same advantage became a distinct liability when writing on animal skin (vellum). It meant having to make several strokes for each letter, whereas rival Latin alphabets had devised cursive scripts which allowed the scribe to write letters as a unit without lifting the pen.

However, Runic did make three lasting contributions to the Old English alphabet: it 'donated' two of its symbols, as well as the name 'æsc' for a third, the symbol <æ>, borrowed from Late Latin spelling, to represent the phoneme /æ/. Significantly, of the two 'donated' symbols, þ ('thorn') and ƿ ('wynn'), the first represented a phoneme which was absent in Latin, while the second stood for a phoneme whose symbol, <u>, was ambiguous in Latin. Given its phonemic accuracy it is easy to see why Anglo-Saxon scribes would have been attracted to Runic as a source of symbols. Yet these runic contributions were evidently not part of the earliest Old English alphabet; they begin to appear very sporadically in the last quarter of the seventh century in texts from the South of England and only much later in the north of England, with thorn replacing the earlier symbols <th>/<d>, and wynn replacing <uu>. Why these two runic symbols were not adopted from the outset will become evident in the discussion of influences below.

**Frankish influence:** The digraph <uu> (to represent the phoneme /w/) was a usage also attested among another Germanic people, the Franks, living on the other side of the English Channel across from the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Kent. The Franks occasionally wrote in the vernacular using a modified version of the Latin alphabet. The main evidence for this activity is a set of vernacular glosses ('The Marberg Glosses') in the mainly Latin text of the *Lex Saliica*, a collection of Frankish laws compiled in the sixth century. Relations between the Kentish kingdom of south-east England and the Franks were quite close at this time. King Æthelberht of Kent married a Frankish princess, Bertha, who brought her chaplain with her. Years later (in 597) she persuaded her husband to allow entry to a Christian mission led by Bishop Augustine and sent by Pope Gregory from Rome. Many scholars believe that the earliest writing of Old English took place in Kent at this time, no doubt carried out by Frankish scribes. They point to a well-known passage in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* summing up the achievements of King Æthelberht's reign (c. 579–616), which says that the king drew up a code of laws in English. Unfortunately, the

laws attributed to this king have survived in a manuscript some 500 years after his time (*Codex Roffensis*, Rochester Cathedral Library, MS A.3.5) and consequently they cannot offer any insights into the earliest English alphabet. At best we may conjecture that the single Frankish contribution to the Old English alphabet was <uu> for /w/, and even this symbol was eventually displaced by runic wynn.

**Brythonic:** Besides the Franks at Canterbury, there were two indigenous cultures in seventh-century Britain who not only used the Roman alphabet for writing Latin but had also adapted it for the writing of their vernaculars; and were thus potentially in a position to influence the formation of an Old English alphabet. Both were Celtic-speaking peoples. The earlier and more ubiquitous of the two were the Brythonic Celts who had borne the brunt of the Anglo-Saxon invasions and conquest from the fourth to the early seventh centuries. By this date they were to be found mainly in the west of Britain, from Devon and Cornwall in the south to Strathclyde in the north. Welsh, the most prominent of the regional varieties of Brythonic in the sixth century, already had its own alphabet by that time. Not surprisingly, given the strong Roman cultural heritage of the indigenous Britons, the Welsh alphabet was based on that of Latin—on a trimmed version of the Latin alphabet described by Donatus (discussed below). The influence of the Welsh alphabet extended well beyond its own linguistic borders, to Ireland, where by the late sixth century, Welsh spelling practices (introduced by Welsh ecclesiastics) provided the model for a ‘new’ Irish alphabet—there was an earlier alphabet for representing Irish known as Ogam.

If Welsh influence was so strong in Ireland, then why not also in Anglo-Saxon England, especially since the two peoples lived in such close proximity? The reality was that the Welsh never reconciled themselves to their pagan neighbours who had conquered much of their territory and who even after their conversion to Christianity continued to appropriate their ecclesiastical lands. No doubt individual Brythonic ecclesiastics and communities assisted in the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons, but in general the relationship was one of mutual suspicion and hostility, a state of affairs reflected in Bede’s *History*. Such an environment would hardly have been conducive to the intellectual exchanges and mentoring that make possible the reception of literacy in Latin, much less the special circumstances required for the formation of a vernacular alphabet in English. In any case the evidence for Welsh vernacular writing at this early date is scarce, consisting mainly of inscriptions on stone and possibly some early poems, suggesting that it was not likely to have exercised any great influence outside its own culture. Significantly, there are striking differences between the usages of

the Old Welsh and Old English alphabets; for example, for /y/, Old Welsh used the symbol <u> but Old English <ui> (probably under Irish influence) and later /y/ (under the influence of Greek speakers at Canterbury). It is highly unlikely then that the Britons would have influenced Anglo-Saxon literacy in view of the longstanding hostility between the two peoples and the reluctance of Brythonic clerics to become involved in the conversion of the Germanic invaders.

**Irish:** The third centre of literacy among the neighbours of the Anglo-Saxons was located in north-west Britain, off the coast of Scotland among the Hebrides. This large archipelago had for several centuries been colonized by an Irish people known as Dál Riata who had brought with them their native Gaelic/Irish language. More recently, in the late sixth century it had become the home of a famous Irish ecclesiastic, Columba (Irish, *Columcille*), who established a monastery on the island of Iona, c. 570. By the time of the founder's death Iona became a major monastery, the spiritual and intellectual center of the Irish kingdom of Dál Riata.

In the early seventh century Iona began to extend its influence to the Anglo-Saxon part of Britain. At this time it first established contacts with members of the ruling aristocracy of northern England (Northumbria) who took refuge there. The most prominent of these was the family of King Æthelfrith of Bernicia which was forced into exile in Dál Riata c. 620. One of Æthelfrith's sons, Oswald, who was baptized at Iona, subsequently became King of Northumbria and in that capacity invited the community of Iona to send missionaries to convert his kingdom. They arrived in Northumbria in 635 and for the next thirty years directly controlled the mission from their base on the island of Lindisfarne. As Christian missionaries they sought to train a native clergy, teaching them to read and write in Latin. Even after Iona lost direct control of Northumbria in 664, the pedagogical influence remained strong; from the mid seventh to the first half of the eighth century many English students flocked to Ireland to pursue higher studies. This unbroken chain of contacts between Irish teachers and their English students ensured in the first instance a solid grounding in Latin literacy. More importantly, the close relationship all through the middle and later years of the seventh century made possible an environment conducive to the formation of an alphabet designed for the writing of Old English.

As I will argue below, that alphabet came to the English ready-made, not from Latin directly but from the modified Latin alphabet used by the Irish for writing their own language, Old Irish. By the late sixth century Old Irish was being recorded in writing. The earliest surviving example of such literature is a eulogy on Columba of Iona (the *Amra Coluimh Cille*) probably composed soon after

his death in 597. We also find Irish ecclesiastics in the early seventh century employing their vernacular as a medium for didactic religious prose. The alphabet which they used for that purpose was based on a modified Latin alphabet, marked by a smaller number of symbols. Whereas the full Latin alphabet consisted of 23 letters, the Irish one used only 18 of these (<a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, l, m, n, o, p, r, s, t, u>), omitting <k, q, x, y, and z>. Significantly, a similar kind of ‘reduced’ Latin alphabet was advocated by the Late Latin grammarians, notably the great Roman grammarian Aelius Donatus who flourished in the mid-fourth century A.D. Donatus’s system was further popularized in the seventh century by Isidore of Seville in his *Etymologiae* (Liv.10), probably the most influential work of the early Middle Ages after the Bible. In his treatment of the Latin alphabet Donatus (in *Ars Maior* I.2) discussed a full Latin alphabet of 23 symbols, comprising 5 vowels (<a, o, u, e, i>) and 18 consonants (<b, c, d, f, g, h, k, l, m, n, p, q, r, s, t, x, y, z>). Having done so he then proceeded to describe a more practical, functional, alphabet consisting of 5 vowels and 12 consonants, that is, only 17 symbols in all.

A comparison between this ‘reduced’ Latin alphabet (‘Donatus’) and the Old Irish alphabet shows how closely they match:

The ‘reduced’ Alphabet of Donatus:

vowels: **a, o, u, e, i**

consonants: **b, c, d, f, g, l, m, n, p, r, s, t**

The Old Irish Alphabet:

vowels: **a, o, u, e, i**

consonants: **b, c, d, f, g, h, l, m, n, p, r, s, t**

The only difference between the two is the extra symbol <h> present in the Irish alphabet. Turning to the Old English alphabet, we find that it also has as its basis a modified Latin alphabet which, like that of Donatus, omits <k, q, x, y, z>. Indeed, so close are the two that the standard modern grammars of Old English (notably those of Alistair Campbell and Sievers-Brunner) assumed that Donatus provided the model for the Old English alphabet.

But that assumption is unlikely for a number of reasons. First, like the Irish alphabet English employs the additional letter <h>, a symbol rejected by Donatus. Secondly, the Old English alphabet

has three digraph symbols (that is, two letters used to represent a single sound/phoneme), <ch, th, uu>, for the first two of which Latin provided no model since it did not have the phonemes represented by these symbols. The last of these digraphs, as I mentioned before, probably comes from Frankish usage which employed <uu> to represent the phoneme /w/, a sound common in Frankish (Germanic). Although Frankish scribes could in principle have used the Latin symbol <u> for this purpose, they chose instead the digraph <uu>, probably to avoid the potential ambiguity of Latin <u> which could represent either /u/ or /w/. For example in Frankish *wuala* ('a Walloon') the digraph <uu> signaled that the first phoneme was /w/, whereas the alternative spelling *uala* might be misconstrued as having an initial diphthong /ua/. As for the first two digraphs (<ch> and <th>), almost certainly they came from Old Irish which used them expressly to represent the fricatives /X/ and /θ/. (These two digraphs are present in Latin but only for Greek-derived words, and even then they have plosive rather than fricative values.)

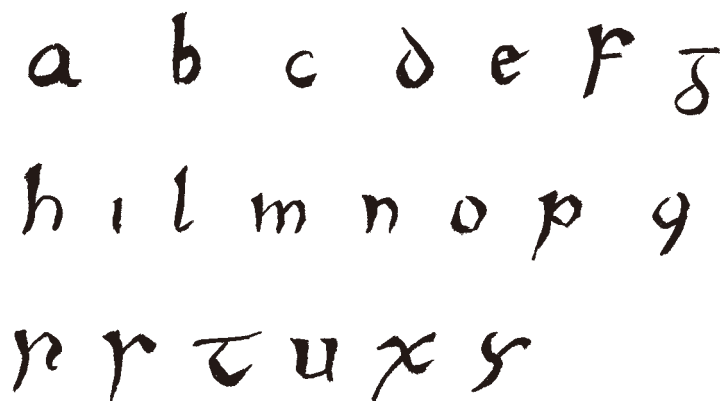
Thirdly, Old English employs a very peculiar spelling convention whereby the symbols <b, d, g> are bivalent, that is they represent both /b, d, g/ and the fricatives /β, ð, γ/, depending on their position within the word. This usage is most plausibly explained by reference to Old Irish which uses these symbols in precisely the same way under the influence of Brythonic pronunciations of Latin /b, d, g/. Such use of bivalent symbols ran contrary to Donatus' theory of letters, according to which each letter should have a constant *potestas*, that is, it should represent the same sound always. In each case where the Old English alphabet diverges from Donatus' model it agrees with Old Irish usage. And in each case that usage seems to have originated with Old Irish.

Another feature of the earliest Old English alphabet that points to an Irish model is the doubling of a vowel symbol to indicate length; for example, OE *booc* (for *bōc*, 'a book'). This purely orthographic device had its ultimate origins in Classical Latin. Much later it was revived by the Late Latin grammarians who, however, rarely practiced what they preached in this matter. Instead, they preferred marking a long vowel with an apex (e.g. <ô>), a diacritic which gradually assumed the form of an acute accent (<ó>). Seventh-century Irish scribes borrowed the Late Latin usage of doubling the vowel to indicate length, but they applied it much more widely than that model allowed. In Latin, doubling was restricted to the symbols <a, e, u>, whereas in Irish it was used on all five primary vowels <a, o, u, e, i>; moreover, in Irish doubling was restricted to vowels in closed syllables. The earliest English texts, where doubling is especially common, follow the Irish practice, using doubling for the five primary vowels—but not for vowels represented by digraphs, such as <ae>,



<ui> and <oi>. And their choice of doubling rather than the apex or acute accent of Late Latin suggests imitation of the Irish model current in the seventh century.

In addition to spelling conventions and usages, there is also the evidence of scripts to consider. The Irish repertoire of scripts for writing Latin (and the vernacular) was well developed by the second half of the seventh century, though the precise chronology remains uncertain. It is likely that the Irish Bishop Aidan of Northumbria and his followers used Irish half-uncial, a script developed in Ireland as early as the late sixth century. With the flourishing of scholarship in the monastic schools of Ireland during the first half of the seventh century there arose the need for a more practical form of writing that used as little of the precious parchment as possible and that could be executed quickly. The result was a new script known as Insular minuscule.



[Insular Minuscule]

These two scripts (half-uncial and minuscule) would have been taught by Irish teachers to their English students when they learned to read and write Latin. Their ubiquitous presence (especially minuscule) in documents from all over England, north, south and west, offers the most telling proof of the Irish contribution to literacy in England. In the words of Julian Brown, ‘The hypothesis that the Anglo-Saxons derived Phase I cursive [minuscule] from Ireland...is consistent with what we know about England’s dependence on other aspects of Irish ecclesiastical culture in the seventh century....To have created as complicated a cursive script out of the same formal elements [sc. of Italian uncial] and to have “canonized” it and diffused it all over England by the end of the seventh century would surely have been beyond the powers of the Anglo-Saxon intelligentsia who were still feeling their way....’.

What does the influence of these Irish scripts have to do with the creation of the Old English alphabet? To answer that question requires us to consider the process whereby Irish teachers taught their students how to read and write Latin. The first step would have been learning the letters of the Latin alphabet, each of which had its own name. The student learned to discern the visual ‘elements’ of each letter and their ‘secrets’, presumably allegorical interpretations of their names. Having mastered the individual letters and their corresponding sounds, he would have learned to combine consonants and vowels in syllables. From syllables he would have progressed to single words and thence to short continuous passages, probably with words split into separate syllables to facilitate reading. This process is illustrated by a story in Bede’s *History* (V. 2) which tells how John of Beverley (who had received his elementary education from Irish teachers) cured a boy dumb from birth. John then proceeded to teach him the names of the letters: ‘Say A; say B’. After the boy had repeated the names of the letters the bishop added syllables and words, finally teaching him to say longer sentences.

Writing was taught simultaneously with reading; the student was given a written alphabet as a model, probably in bold, large (half-uncial) letters engraved on a tablet (Lat. *productalis*). Presumably, the same progression from individual letters to words to short sentences that was used for reading Latin was followed here. In this way students could copy for themselves passages for study while also taking dictations from the master. The normal writing material was a set of wax tablets, which could be conveniently held in one’s hand. But the primary advantage of wax tablets was a writing surface that could easily be smoothed (and its text erased) to make way for the next assignment. The text used for learning Latin was the Psalms from the Old Testament—a choice which reflects the monastic setting of this activity. The process of mastering the Psalms might take anything from six months to three years, depending on the aptitude of the student.

This method of teaching literacy was used throughout western Christendom. But several circumstances made the Irish approach different. One was that Latin was a totally foreign language for the Irish, so they had to devise all kinds of aids and pedagogical tools to master it, with the result that their teaching process became more intense and personal. In a conventional continental monastery the process of learning to read and write Latin was a regulated activity: students would study their letters for three hours every morning under the supervision of a learned monk. In the Irish system, judging by the Lives of Irish saints, the student was assigned a particular master and seems to have never been far away from him. He probably stayed by his side as his personal servant,

while at the same time receiving instruction from him as occasion allowed. For example, a story in the *Life of Saint Cainnech* (probably eighth century) tells how when the saint went missing, only his student knew where he was hiding, having visited him at night so that the saint could write out his assignment for him on a wax tablet. Evidently, Irish missionaries brought this same pedagogical system with them to England. Bede describes Bishop Aidan moving about the countryside accompanied by a large band of followers who were either ‘studying the Scriptures or learning the psalms’.

We also have Bede’s testimony that beginning about 650 many of these same Englishmen travelled to Ireland for higher studies. There, they would have been exposed to a monastic culture that was comfortable with bilingual literacy (Latin and Old Irish). All the activities implied in their studies, reading, copying, comprehending, memorizing, would have been conducted in a bilingual (or even trilingual) setting of Latin and Irish (and Old English). Inevitably, these English students would also have become bilingual and bi-literate themselves, and having acquired first-hand knowledge of how the Irish had applied the Latin alphabet to the writing of their native language (Irish) would have quite naturally replicated the process in constructing an alphabet for their own language (English). In line with this hypothesis one would also expect that for the actual representation of the letters of this new Old English alphabet the Anglo-Saxons would also have drawn on an Irish model. Such indeed is the case: the earliest Old English writings exclusively employ the Irish script of Insular minuscule—even though other scripts introduced and propagated by the Roman mission were available.

To sum up: while the ultimate basis of the Old English alphabet was the modified Latin alphabet of ‘Donatus’, the immediate source was the Irish alphabet (itself based on ‘Donatus’) which in addition supplied Old English with the digraphs <ch, th>, the bivalency of <b, d, g>, and the usage of doubling vowels to indicate length. From Frankish, probably came the digraph <uu>. This spelling system, the earliest form of the Old English alphabet, underwent modifications in the late seventh century: the addition of two symbols from Runic, **h** and **ƿ** (replacing <th/d> and <uu> respectively); and use of the symbol <y> (originally used in Latin for Greek <υ>, ‘upsilon’) to represent a high front rounded vowel /y/, a practice probably introduced at Archbishop Theodore’s Greek school at Canterbury (c. 670). Thus, the story of the formation of the earliest Old English alphabet reflects the different literary influences at work in seventh-century England: native Anglo-Saxon, Frankish, Irish, and even Greek.