

## Gothic Letterforms and *Codex Vindobonensis*

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Traditionally the Gothic bishop Wulfila (c. 311–c. 383) is credited with the development of Gothic alphabetic letters. The Gothic documents which have come down to us from the fifth and early sixth century exhibit letterforms and scribal practices which have led to various hypotheses about the source(s) of the Gothic letterforms. Although the existence of Gothic alphabets in *Codex Vindobonensis* has been long known, the lack of an adequate appraisal of the alphabets has led to their neglect. An appraisal is offered here which attaches great significance to these alphabets as evidence of an early phase in the development of Gothic letterforms, and hence of prime importance for a derivation of the Gothic alphabet.

Some 150 years after the birth of Christ, the first reference to the Goths was made by the Greek geographer Ptolemy. By that time many Goths had left their Scandinavian homeland, crossed the Baltic, and settled in the vicinity of the Vistula. Throughout the second century A.D. there was a steady flow of Goths toward the Black Sea. The first groups reached that area about 170, and for the next hundred years the Gothic population there was steadily increased by new arrivals. About 260 two major groups of Goths emerged: the Visigoths and the Ostrogoths. The Ostrogoths settled briefly in an area to the north of the Black Sea; the Visigoths established themselves at first in Lower Dacia to the west of the Black Sea and north of the Danube. Pursued by the Huns, the Visigoths were later compelled to cross the Danube and settle in Lower Moesia. Only after the battle of Adrianople in 378 were the ever transient Visigoths able to secure a somewhat permanent settlement in Thracia.

The Visigothic conversion to Christianity was a gradual acceptance and observance of Christian tenets. The first Visigothic contacts with Christianity apparently occurred during raids into Roman provinces in the latter part of the third century. Later forages in Asia Minor—particularly Phrygia, Galatia, and Cappadocia—netted the Visigoths

a great many prisoners, a number of whom were Christians. Despite their captivity, these Christians were apparently able to convert a few of their captors. Missionaries from both the East and the West were yet another source of Christian influence during the fourth century. Working among the Goths, Audius of Mesopotamia is said to have brought about many conversions, and there are even reports of Gothic monks. Yet, in spite of these various forces, there were very few Christian Goths before 370. Apparently it was sometime between 383 and 395, while settled in Moesia, that a large number of Goths became Christian.

Never long in any one location, the Goths were constantly on the move within the general area of Moesia and Thracia. In 375 began what are usually called the Barbarian Migrations, and during the next century the Visigoths wandered from the Black Sea to southern France and the Iberian peninsula, while the Ostrogoths established a kingdom in northern Italy. It was during the Ostrogothic sovereignty in Italy that the extant Gothic manuscripts were written.

During the early period of Christian growth among the Goths, Wulfila, the grandson of a captive Cappadocian Christian, became a leader in the spiritual life of Visigothic communities in Lower Moesia. Wulfila (c. 311–c. 383) was a zealous apostle of the faith and persuaded many Goths to forsake their pagan ways. In 341 he was appointed bishop, and he served in this capacity for some forty years. Most of our knowledge about Wulfila's creed (Arianism) and activities as a church leader comes from a biography written by his protegee, Auxentius of Dorostorum. Although Auxentius is silent on the matter, many later writers, among whom are the fifth-century church historians Philostorgios and Sokrates, credit Wulfila with the invention of Gothic manuscriptal letterforms.

Table I illustrates Gothic alphabetic letterforms, especially as they are found in *Codex Argenteus* (c. 600), the most famous of Gothic manuscripts. Some hypotheses proposed about the derivation of Gothic alphabetic letters would admit only a single source for all of the letters; others would trace some letters to the Greek, some to the Latin, and yet others to the runic alphabet. All of these hypotheses are based upon the letterforms as they are found in the extant Gothic Biblical codices (primarily *Codex Argenteus*), the earliest of which was written in Italy in the late fifth century nearly 200 years after Wul-

fla's death. The lapse of time between the origination of the letterforms and their documentation, coupled with an entirely different geographical location of the scriptoria which produced the extant codices, makes it thinkable that some of the letterforms in Table I are not those which Wulfila himself originally devised or adapted for writing the Gothic language. In a much later, non-Gothic manuscript—*Codex Vindobonensis* (c. 800)—there are Gothic alphabets which contain letterforms not found in any of the extant Gothic manuscripts. After a brief survey of the extant Gothic manuscripts and the letterforms used in their production, it will be shown how the unique Gothic letterforms in *Codex Vindobonensis* could well be earlier versions of letterforms found in the extant Gothic documents. As a link between Wulfila's original alphabetic letters and those of the fifth and sixth centuries, these letterforms would be very important for a derivation of the Gothic alphabet.

Several manuscript fragments containing the Gothic rendering of the Gospels and Pauline letters are the primary source of Gothic letterforms. These Biblical documents are the *Codex Argenteus*; the *Codices Ambrosiani A, B, C, D, and E*; *Codex Carolinus*; and *Codex Gissensis*. The problems of dating these manuscripts and determining the location of the Gothic scriptoria which produced them are very

Table I. The Gothic Alphabet.<sup>1</sup>

Letterform	Α	Β	Γ	Δ	Ε	Ϛ	Ζ	Η	Ψ
Numerical Value	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Transliteration	a	b	g	d	e	q	z	h	p
Letterform	Ι	Κ	Λ	Μ	Ν	Ϛ	Π	Π	Υ
Numerical Value	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90
Transliteration	i	k	l	m	n	j	u	p	o
Letterform	Κ	Σ	Τ	Υ	ƿ	Χ	Θ	Ϛ	↑
Numerical Value	100	200	300	400	500	600	700	800	900
Transliteration	r	s	t	w	f	x	h	o	o

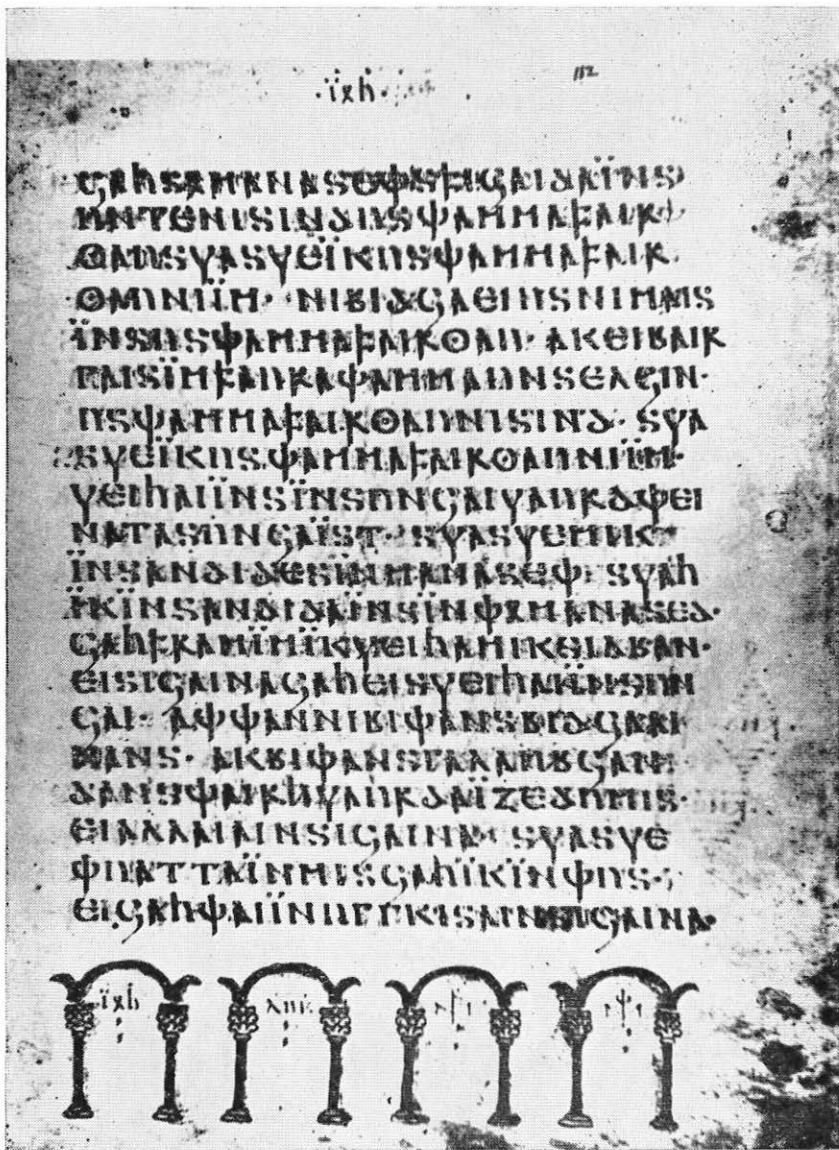


Figure 1. *Codex Argenteus*, the Gospel according to John, 17:14–21. Reproduced from the facsimile edition by von Friesen and Grape (1927).

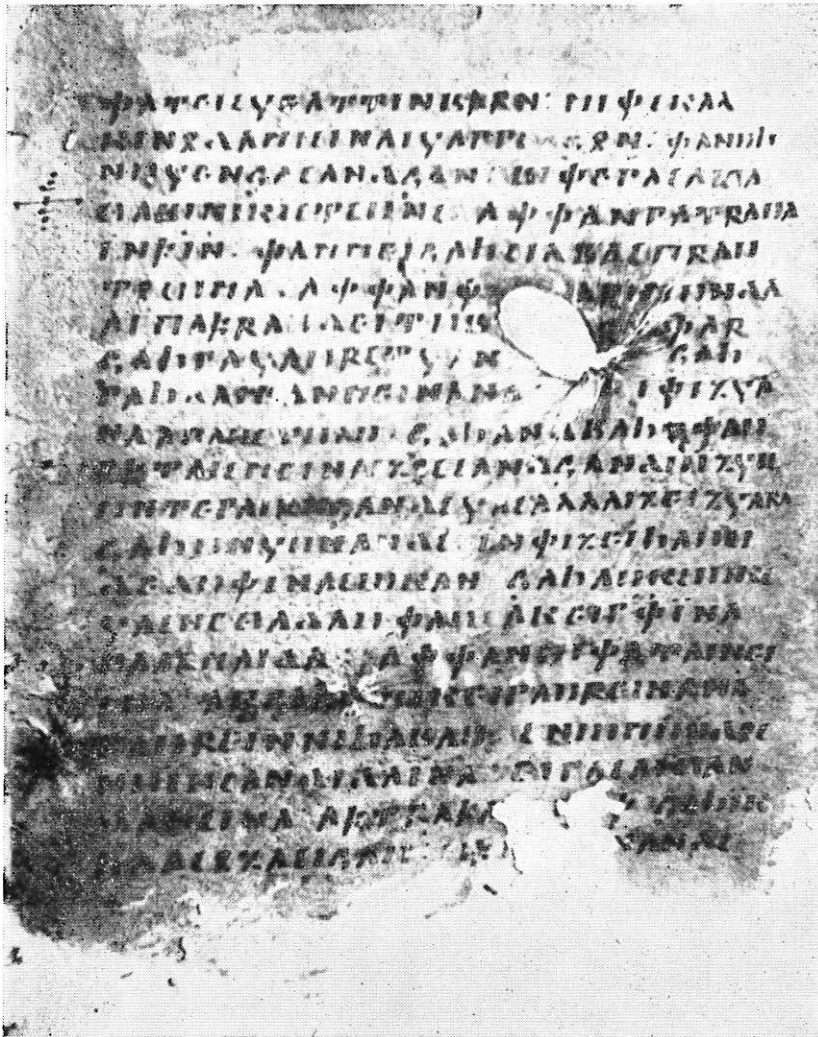


Figure 2. *Codex Ambrosianus B*, Paul's letter to the Philippians, 2:22-28. Reproduced from the facsimile edition by de Vries (1936).

complex. In general terms, the dating has ranged from 400 to 600 A.D. *Codex Carolinus* and *Codex Gissensis* are usually considered to have been written earlier than the others, whereas *Codex Argenteus* is generally regarded as the last to have been written. The scriptoria in which these codices were written are believed to have been located in northern Italy and possibly in the southeastern corner of France.

The Gothic Biblical documents are written with letterforms which may be called uncial, a term of Latin and Greek palaeography used to describe letterforms that are rounded or that have descenders or ascenders. In Gothic manuscript writing two types of uncial—"upright" and "sloping"—are distinguished. When the upright uncial is formed, the squared tip of the pen is held at a right angle to the writing line and the vertical pen stroke forms a right angle with the base line. In writing the sloping uncial, the pen is tilted at a 30° or 60° angle away from the shoulder and the vertical pen stroke forms a 60° angle with the base line. Upright uncials were used in the writing of *Codex Argenteus* (Fig. 1); *Codex Carolinus*; *Codices Ambrosiani A, C, E*; and *Codex Gissensis*. Sloping uncials were employed for producing *Codices Ambrosiani B* (Fig. 2) and *D*.

Of the various aspects of Gothic palaeography, the abbreviation of final -n and -m should be mentioned. In the texts written with upright uncials, the scribe abbreviated final -n and -m by drawing a line over the letter which immediately preceded the -n or -m. In the manuscripts written with sloping uncials only final -n was handled in this way; final -m was never abbreviated. The usual interpretation of this practice is that the abbreviation of both final -n and -m is based upon the Latin practice, whereas the abbreviation of only final -n is Greek in origin (there are no final -m's in native Greek words).

Although of only secondary importance, two contractual agreements containing several phrases in Gothic might be mentioned. These contracts preserve the only specimens of Gothic cursive handwriting (Fig. 3). Both manuscripts were found in northern Italy—one in Ravenna dated c. 551 and the other in Arezzo dated c. 540.

All the codices mentioned above contain the Gothic translation of the New Testament and were written during the late fifth and early sixth centuries. *Codex Windobonensis* is not a Gothic Biblical account, but rather mainly a collection of personal letters by Alcuin and others addressed to Arn, an archbishop of Salzburg. This codex was compiled about 799 or roughly 100–150 years after the last extant Gothic codex

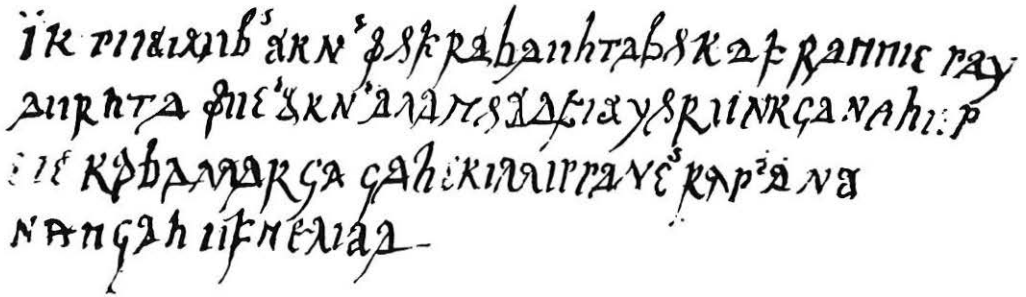


Figure 3. Reproduced handwriting of the Gothic clergyman Gudilub. Taken from the facsimile edition by Massmann (1838).

was written. Besides this correspondence, which is in Latin, there are several alphabets, which include one partial and two complete Gothic alphabets (Figs. 4 and 5). It cannot be said precisely who wrote these Gothic alphabets nor when nor where the writing took place. Palaeographic and historical evidence suggests an eighth-century scribe of a Salzburg scriptorium.

Customarily the partial Gothic alphabet on folium 20r (Fig. 4) is designated as “a,” the alphabet near the left margin of folium 20v (Fig. 5) as “b” and the alphabet to its right as “c.”<sup>3</sup>

On folium 20r (Fig. 4) the first two columns on the left contain the Anglo-Saxon runic letters in runic alphabetic order. To the right of each letter is its name, and above each letter is evidently a transliteration. The runic signs are in a reddish-orange ink, whereas the notations are in brown. The third column contains Gothic alphabet “a” (Fig. 4). Obviously incomplete, this alphabet is composed of only the first 16 letters in Gothic alphabetic order. In the upper right-hand corner is a stray Gothic j.

Folium 20v (Fig. 5) contains a variety of information. Dividing the page in half vertically so that the alphabets are on the left, the information recorded on the right falls into three groups. From top to bottom, the first four lines are phrases in Gothic with an Old High German equivalent written above each word. The next six lines are a commentary in Latin on the pronunciation of Gothic letters j, g, ai, and q. The last two lines are composed of numbers in Gothic with a roman numeral below. The interpretations of this information vary, but are of no consequence here. The left-hand portion of the page contains Gothic alphabets, and across the top of the page there is a

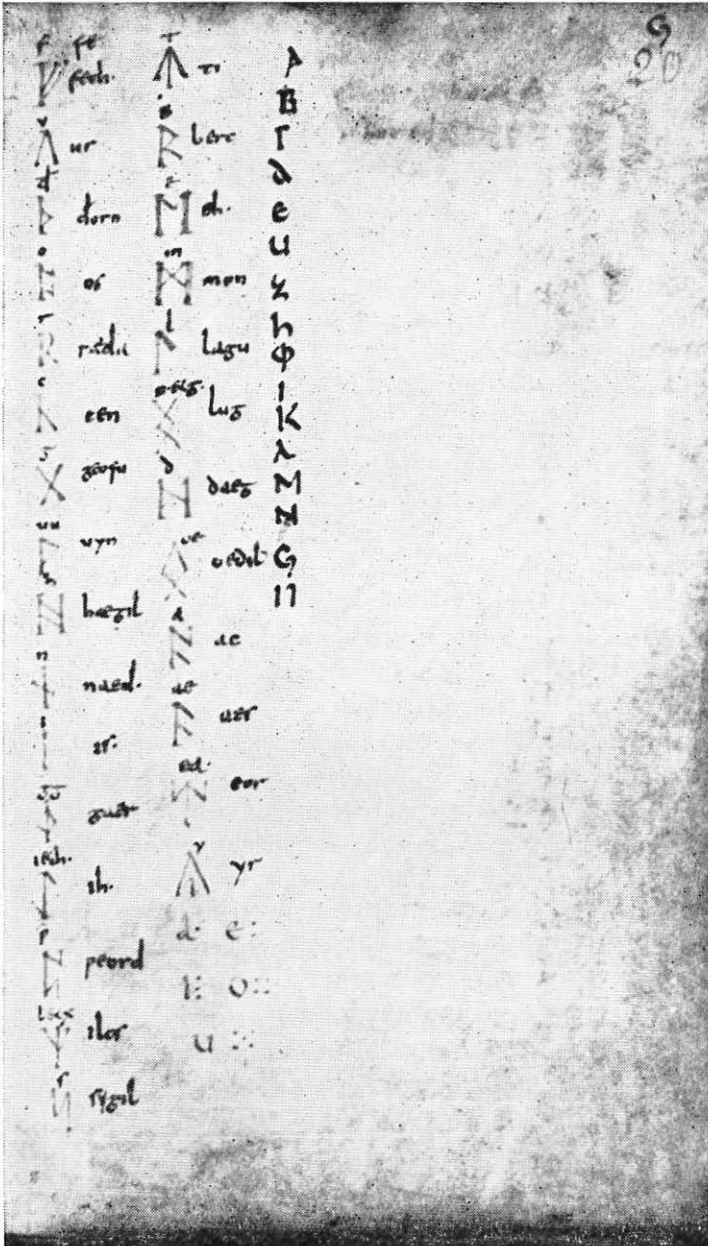


Figure 4. *Codex Vindobonensis*, folium 20r. Both photographs of the Gothic alphabets in *Codex Vindobonensis* were kindly furnished by Dr. Franz Unterkircher of the Austrian National Library.

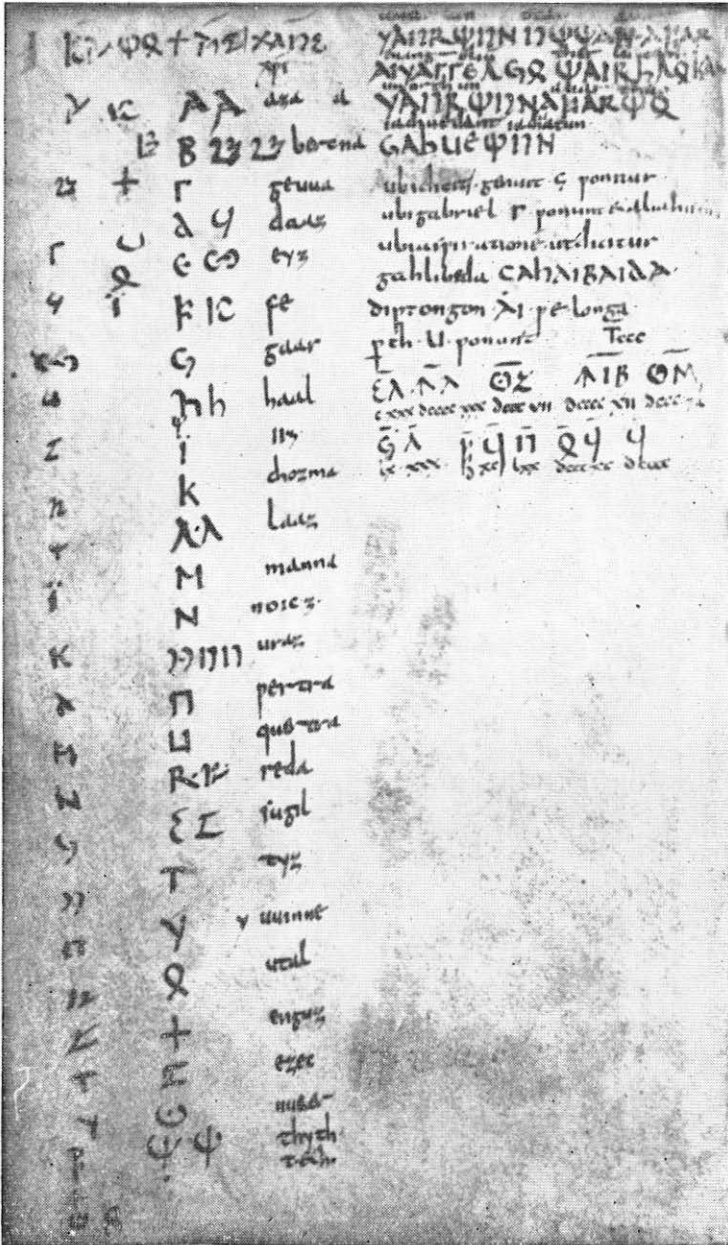


Figure 5. Codex Vindobonensis, folium 20v.

string of letters which appear to be abbreviations of *nomina sacra*. Alphabet "b" is composed of all the alphabetic letters in Gothic alphabetic order, although the signs for 90 and 900—which have no phonological, only numerical value—are not present. Alphabet "c" also contains all the letters with phonological values, but none of only numerical value. The letters of this alphabet are not arranged in Gothic alphabetic order (cf. Table I) nor are they completely in Latin alphabetic order. The last five letters seem to come at random. To the right of these letters are their names.

The three alphabets on these folia are unmistakably Gothic, yet there is something peculiar about the letters, especially those of alphabet "b." After scrutinizing the letters of alphabet "b," some of the ways in which they differ from their counterparts in the Biblical manuscripts can be pointed out. The a has a cross bar, as do all a's on these folia. The b is jagged, and there is a distinct tendency to close the upper loop. The d and e are totally unlike their counterparts in any other manuscript. The dot between the bars of the u appears only in the alphabets of *Codex Vindobonensis*. The r with the feature of a closed loop is similar to the r of the sloping uncial style, but not that of the upright uncial; the leg rising at a 45° angle is found, however, only in these alphabets. The x of the Biblical manuscripts is turned here and gives the appearance of a plus + sign. The form of hu with the circular portion open at the top is similar to the sloping uncial, but not the upright.

The letters of alphabet "c" are essentially the same as those of the sloping uncials, but some of the variants immediately to the right are very much like their counterparts in alphabet "b," especially b, d, e, r, and s. The reasons behind the variants of a, l, u, and th are not easy to fathom. The letter f has a variation without a counterpart in alphabet "b" (note the use of this variant in the abbreviations for *nomina sacra* at the top of the page [Fig. 5]). The closed loop of the d is repeated in alphabet "a."

The a, b, and d of alphabet "a" are similar to those of alphabet "c," but the th of alphabet "a" with its closed circular form is unique.

The scribe's purpose in recording these Gothic letterforms, names, phrases, remarks on pronunciation, numbers, and abbreviations for *nomina sacra* is open to debate. The compiler of this portion of *Codex Vindobonensis* evidently had an interest in old, antiquated writing

systems for he not only included the runic and Gothic alphabetic letters on folia 20r and 20v, but also the Greek letters, their names and numerical values on folia 19r and 19v.

In putting his information down on folium 20v, it appears as though the scribe wrote alphabet “c” first, since it consists of letterforms which are very similar—though not identical—to those in the Biblical manuscripts. The scribe seems to have also known that several letters had variant forms—evidently outmoded—and added them next to the current forms for completeness’ sake. Then he added the names of the letters. Next the scribe wrote the material to the right of the alphabets. Note that he did not use any of the variant letters, but only the “current” ones.

The same scribe—or perhaps another scribe—wrote out alphabet “b” and the abbreviations for *nomina sacra*. Note that the variant f of alphabet “b” was used in these abbreviations, but not the variant s; that the a is similar to that of alphabet “b,” but not that of alphabet “c.” It is possible that the scribe wanted to provide the reader with a “true” Gothic alphabet; i.e., he gave the original Gothic alphabetic letterforms and ordered them according to the traditional Gothic alphabetic sequence.

Above, it was assumed that the variant letterforms antedated rather than postdated those of the Biblical manuscripts. The basis for such an assumption is manifold. The earliest of the extant Gothic manuscripts was written at least a century after Wulfila’s death (c. 383), and therefore it cannot be assumed that the letterforms of the extant manuscripts are necessarily the original forms in every case. It must also be kept in mind, that the Gothic manuscriptal alphabet was originated in an area of the world dominated by Greek language and scriptoria. Scholars have therefore rightly sought and found Grecian influence on various aspects of Gothic palaeography. On the other hand, all extant manuscripts were written in areas far removed from the site of development where Latin culture and scriptoria were predominant. Many scholars have detected a Latin influence on the Gothic writing system, but the question whether this influence was primary (i.e., at the time of origination) or secondary (i.e., during the period of Gothic settlement in northern Italy) has not been resolved, but silently set aside. Investigations of Gothic scribal practices show that there is a great uniformity among the letterforms of all extant

manuscripts; only the s's and the abbreviations for final -n and -m hint at a departure from a previous scribal practice. It is also possible that the extant manuscripts are among the last Gothic codices ever produced. Not only was there a general decline of the Gothic nation after the death of the Ostrogothic king Theodoric in 526, but the suppression of non-orthodox faiths (the Goths were of the Arian faith) in 533 made the production of many more codices unlikely. Any changes in letterforms must therefore have taken place prior to the writing of the earliest extant manuscripts.

The Gothic alphabets in *Codex Vindobonensis* are important for understanding the development of Gothic manuscriptal letters because they show that significant changes occurred in certain letterforms between the time of origin and the time of the earliest extant manuscript. Major changes took place in the case of d, e, and s, and minor modifications were made in a, b, u, r, and x. At this time it is clear that the letterforms of *Codex Argenteus* are not original forms in every instance; consequently a new study of the Gothic alphabet is necessary which will take the alphabetic letterforms of *Codex Vindobonensis* into consideration.

1. For a detailed description of Gothic calligraphy and a history of Gothic type fonts see Fairbanks and Magoun (1940). Additional information on Gothic scribal pen techniques may be found in Vieh Meyer (1971).
2. As in the case of the Latin and Greek alphabets, the letters of the Gothic alphabet are also used to symbolize numbers.
3. See Grienberger (1896).

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