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## Faliscan

### The alphabet

#### General remarks

The various alphabets of ancient Italy go back to a Western Greek alphabet, which in turn is derived from the Phoenician alphabet. The names of the letters make sense in Phoenician, but not in Greek: the second letter has the sound value *b* (Greek *bēta*) and is the word for ‘house’, a word which in Phoenician began with *b* (Hebrew *bayit*, st. constr. *bēt*).

In (most? all?) Semitic languages words cannot begin with a vowel; since the letter names are nouns in origin and the letters just stand for the first sound of these nouns, this may explain why ancient Semitic languages do not write vowels consistently.

The great innovation in the Greek alphabets is that the old signs for pharyngeal and glottal consonants, for which Greek had no use, were redeployed as vowel signs.

#### Learning the alphabet and the consequences

The alphabet had a fixed order of letters. The names of the letters were learnt by heart in this fixed order and people also had tables with the letter forms, again in the same order, so that they could associate sound and shape.

When people knew the alphabet, they could begin with simple syllables (consonant + vowel), after which they began to write more complex syllables, and finally words.

Around 600BC, the Etruscans invented a teaching aid: simple syllables with a CV shape are left as they are, but around any letter that does not fit into this syllable pattern dots are placed on either side.

The speakers of Venetic adopted this system of syllabic punctuation (though not in their earliest inscriptions), which to us may seem bizarre:

voto klutiiari.s. vha.g.s.to (Pa 16a)  
‘Voto Klutiiaris made (me).’

More important in this connection is what happens to the letters when speakers of a different language learn the alphabet; different sound systems require different ways of writing. Perhaps surprisingly, the alphabet is passed on in its original form and learners do not change much at first. But there are three types of changes that can be made later on:

a) additions: if the language acquiring the alphabet requires more letters for sounds which the other language does not have, these are generally added at the end. Greek added at the end: Φ, X, Ψ, Ω; Etruscan added 8 at the end, which is the sign for /f/, but this was done late; Oscan added **í** and **ú** at the end; Latin added Y and Z for Greek words.

b) reductions: if the language acquiring the alphabet requires fewer letters than the other language, some letters can be eliminated. However, given the way in which the alphabet is learned, this is extremely rare, and ancient alphabets often contain ‘dead letters’ which are not used. Etruscan alphabets contain e.g. o, a letter not used in actual Etruscan texts.

c) substitutions: extremely rare; Latin originally had a dead letter Z in the seventh place of the alphabet, but had no need for it. Fairly late it replaced this letter by a new letter G, for which there was a need, but which previously had to be rendered in the same way as /k/.

## The Etruscan alphabet

The old Etruscan alphabet contains the following letters (including dead letters):

a b c d e v z h  $\vartheta$  i k l m n s<sup>+</sup> o p  $\acute{s}$  q r s t u  $\acute{s}$   $\varphi$   $\chi$

v is the normal transliteration of the digamma; it stands for a bilabial glide (/w/). Etruscan also had a phoneme /f/, for which there was no letter. /f/ was represented by the digraph vh originally, but later the letter 8 (sound value /f/) was added at the end of the alphabet.

Etruscan had four vowel phonemes: i, e, a, u. Thus, o is a dead letter.

Etruscan does not seem to have had voiced stops; it may have had an opposition between voiceless unaspirated and voiceless aspirated stops. b and d are dead letters. c, the Greek  $\gamma$ , stands for a voiced sound in Greek and ought to be a dead letter in Etruscan, but it is used for /k/.

In fact, southern Etruscan uses three signs for /k/: q before u, k before a, and c before e and i. It is occasionally argued that the three letters for /k/ represent different allophones, but that is unlikely for a number of reasons:

- a) in northern Etruscan only the letter k is used from the beginning;
- b) in southern Etruscan this convention is not maintained for longer than a century;
- c) the letter q is given up first; phonetically, it should be closer to k than to c, but it is replaced by c;
- d) how many phonetically untrained speakers of English can actually distinguish between the k-sound in *kill* and *cool*, let alone between these and the sound in *Carl*?

In Greek Q (*koppa*) was used before O and K elsewhere; the restriction of Q to this sequence seems to have to do with its name, which began /ko-/. The

Etruscan rule is relatively easy to explain: Q is used before U because of the Greek convention (Etruscan does not distinguish between the sounds u and o). K is used before A because the name *kappa* begins /ka-/. And C (the Greek gamma) is used before E and I because the letter was borrowed under its older name γέμμα.

## The Latin alphabet

It is occasionally argued that the Latin alphabet was borrowed directly from the Greek alphabet, but underwent some Etruscan influence; for instance, early Latin follows the C/K/Q-convention, and this could be secondary Etruscan influence. The alternative is that Latin took over the alphabet from the Etruscans, but that this alphabet underwent some Greek influence; for instance, Latin revived the Etruscan dead letters B, D, O and X and restored the original sound values to them (b, d, o, ks).

Which alternative is more likely? Reviving the old letters B, D, O and X makes sense because (apart from X, which could be written -cs-) otherwise certain phonemic contrasts could not be expressed. This may well be an innovation.

On the other hand, the Romans are unlikely to have adopted the C/K/Q-convention as an innovation. It fulfils no useful function and makes the contrast between the sounds k and g impossible.

Thus, the Latin alphabet presumably inherited the C/K/Q-convention from Etruscan, its ancestor alphabet. The revival of the dead letters is the later result of contact with Greeks.

Etruscan model: a b c d e v z h  $\vartheta$  i k l m n s<sup>+</sup> o p  $\acute{s}$  q r s t u  $\acute{s}$   $\varphi$   $\chi$   
 earliest Latin: a b c d e v z h - i k l m n - o p - q r s t u x - -

Latin has eliminated the letters it does not need. Later z was replaced by g because no need was felt for z. A need for z and also y was felt in the classical period, when these letters were added at the end of the alphabet.

The letter transcribed here as v is the digamma and has the value /w/ in Etruscan. In the fibula from Praeneste, the digraph vh represents /f/, just as in early Etruscan. Presumably v originally stood for /w/ in Latin, as in Etruscan.

However, from very early on the letter u, also used for long and short vowels, came to be used for /w/. This allowed for the simplification of vh to the simple digamma, our modern F; thus the only digraph in the system was eliminated.

How did u come to be used for /w/? There are a number of reasons:

a) the letter i stands for a long or short vowel, but also for the glide /j/; u can also stand for a long or short vowel, so by analogy it might also stand for a glide;

b) as in Greek, diphthongs like /ow/ had always been written with u rather than digamma; the use of u could easily be extended;

c) for the labiovelars the normal spelling was qu (*aqua*) or gu (*sanguis*) rather than q or g with digamma; this usage could easily be extended to sequences of consonant + glide, e.g. *duenos* or *duis* (classical *bonus* and *bis*).

## The Faliscan alphabet

Later inscriptions are written in the Latin alphabet; I am only concerned with the inscriptions in the native script.

We do not have any inscription presenting the alphabet as such. However, all the letters are used which are also used in Latin, except for b, albeit with somewhat different shapes.  $\vartheta$  is also used, but only in Etruscan names.

The Faliscan alphabet is very similar to the earliest Latin alphabet and its writing conventions are also similar; e.g. it also has the C/K/Q-convention and does not have a separate letter for /g/. Was the Faliscan alphabet borrowed independently from Etruscan, or was it taken over from the Romans or vice versa? Faliscan shares two peculiarities with Latin which Etruscan and its neighbour Venetic do not have: u rather than digamma is used for bilabial glides and the letter for /f/ is not a digraph; actually, the letter for /f/ looks like an upward-pointing arrow and is thus somewhat different from the Latin letter.

These two innovations are peculiar enough to make it likely that the Latin alphabet is derived from the Faliscan or vice versa. Which is the direction of borrowing?

If Faliscan is the source of the Latin alphabet, the following problem arises: why does Latin have an F that looks like the Etruscan digamma? We would have to assume that Faliscan began to use u for /w/, then simplified the digraph vh, and then modified the resulting letter to the arrow-shaped one; but just before this last step Latin must have taken over the alphabet. This is possible, but perhaps not very likely: the earliest Faliscan inscriptions already have the arrow-shaped letter, and these are perhaps 25 years younger than Latin inscriptions with digamma-shaped F; the Faliscan modification must have taken place very swiftly.

If, on the other hand, Faliscan has taken over the alphabet from Latin, the modification of the letter F need not have been quick. The rationale behind it could be that the Faliscans were in close contact with the Etruscans and felt uneasy about using a letter with the value /f/ if that letter had the value /w/ in Etruscan. This scenario seems more likely.

Faliscan does not use the letter b. There are two possible explanations. Wachter believes that the phonemes /b/ and /p/ had merged in the history of Faliscan. Indo-European roots have hardly any instances of /b/. Latin acquired some where Faliscan did not: where Latin has b from earlier *b<sup>h</sup>*, Faliscan has the letter f, indicating a fricative. According to Wachter, this rarity of b in addition with Etruscan influence might have led to a merger of /b/ and /p/. I am

not entirely convinced because d and t are clearly distinct. Moreover, if a language does not have two complete series of stops, it is the bilabial ones which are most likely to be voiced and the velar ones which are most likely to be voiceless. The alternative explanation is that the revival of dead letters took place independently in Latin and Faliscan, or that some letters were revived before others and that Faliscan took over the alphabet before b had been revived properly; b would then have been a dead letter in the Faliscan alphabet.

A few more comments are in place:

- a) the original writing direction is from left to right, but after the archaic period the direction changes from right to left; boustrophedon writing is not attested;
- b) originally there was scriptio continua, but later on punctuation or spaces were inserted between words; at the end of lines there is normally no punctuation;
- c) names are commonly abbreviated; some abbreviations are ambiguous between a male and a female name, and here Faliscan has the same convention as Latin: the first letter is written the other way round if the abbreviation refers to a woman. This usage was also extended to unambiguously female abbreviations.