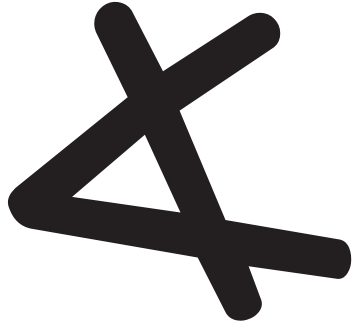# ⚒ Brief History of A

The A, and all the letters in the modern Alphabet, seems to have been a phonetic borrowing from Egyptian Hieroglyphics. The Phoenicians (who inherited this alphabetic system from earlier Semitic people in the Middle East) called the A "alep" which meant "ox" to them. That first A, as you can see, was a bull's head in profile, his horns pointing to the right, his nose to the left.

By the time the Romans got ahold of A, some 1000 years after the Phoenecians, the bull's head had been stood up on his horns. The Romans used a stiff bristled brush to form the sweep of the letters. They painted the letters onto stone with the brush, which gave the letter serifs, and made the strokes to the left thin, and the stroke to the right thick. Then these painted letters were cut into stone, which stiffened the form, creating the Roman A.

The Romans also maintained a purely pen-and-ink letter for use on papyrus. These large formal letters were both called "Capitals" after the monuments they had been carved on, as well as "magiscules" to describe their grandeur.

As the medieval scribes took charge, the A grew more informal, turning into a swoop. These little "magiscule" letters were also some times called "uncials". The scribes rounded the letters, and the letters became the "half-uncials" or "miniscules". The most extreme form, the Irish "insular semi-uncial", had an A that has lost it's peak entirely, turning into an O with a tail.

The diversity of letterforms led to a profound innovation: Capitalization. While the process took hundreds of years, you can already see that the Roman Magiscule A would slowly dominate as the "magiscule" or "capital" A we use today, while the two uncial As would become our two varient "miniscule" or "lower case" As. We will start to see this distinction in that High Medieval letter form we generally call "textura" or "blackletter".

It was the Textura letterforms that Gutenberg inherited and tried to mimic in his first printing attempts. But Italian Rennaissance printers like Aldus Manutius and Nicholas Jenson set about reviving Roman letters for their so-called "humanist" type. They made permanent the then developing practice of fusing the Magiscule and Miniscule letters into one system. And it was Aldus who invented the first so-called "Italic" type face.

The next two hundred years saw endless refinement in the basic letters as used by Jenson and others. The textura, or blackletter, dominated in the Germanic world, but the Roman letter, as it was called, flourished everywhere else, including England. It was so common that it is hard for the untrained eye to notice the difference between Dr. Fell's 17th century Roman, and Caslon's 18th Century Roman.

Baskerville, Bodoni and Didot all hollowed out the old letters until they were waspish and sharp. The thick and thin strokes, created by Roman brushes, grew more and more extreme. They called them Modern letters, and disposed of Caslon, et al. as "Old Style".

But Caslon would have the last laugh. It was he that designed the first sans serif typeface, and that face would ultimately inherit the earth.

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