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A COIN FROM THE DAYS WHEN ENGLISH WAS A TRIBAL LANGUAGE, ILL-ADAPTED TO ROMAN LETTERS

Every so often there is a news story about the difficulty of representing some foreign language in Roman letters. This is especially the case for languages like Chinese which already have a dedicated script.

Every script or alphabet exists for the purpose of representing the sounds of a language. At those times when a language has never been written before, the new script will often be adapted from some existing letters. Sometimes it takes a couple of attempts. We are all familiar with the creation of the Cyrillic script by Cyril and Methodius, from Greek.

The truth is that Roman letters may be the standard today, but the Roman script was never devised to represent most of the languages that are today written in it.

Bible translators very often create the first written version of some tribal language. Consequently they struggle with issues such as sounds that do not match any letter. They end up creating clumps of letters, or using accents or something, in order to cope.

But few of us may have considered that the missionaries to the Anglo-Saxons had to deal with exactly the same problem.

English is not a language which was originally written in Roman script. It was originally written in runes, which were devised to represent the sounds of the English language. (We are all familiar with the appearance of English runes thanks to J.R.R.Tolkien.)

English spelling is as weird as it is for several reasons, but one of the reasons is that the English language contains sounds not found in Latin. One example is the “th” sound, found in “the”.

In runic, “th” was represented by a single character, “thorn”, written as “þ”. Indeed if you visit Iceland, as I have done, you will see this rune still in use, mingled into Roman script. The thorn rune was often written with the loop open at the top, looking more like “y”. This is the origin of such modern curiosities as “ye olde tea shoppe” – the “ye” was originally “þe”.

Few will be aware that there is numismatic evidence of the changeover from runes to Roman. I owe my knowledge of this to Dr Kate Wiles, who posted a coin and a fascinating explanation to twitter [here](#):



Coin of Offa, issued by moneyer Ecghun.

East Anglian mint. 785-793 AD. Type 168.

See [here](#). Said to be found near Great Saxham, Suffolk, 2017.

This is a coin issued by King Offa in the 8th century, produced by the moneyer Ecghun. You can see on the left it says REX ⁊ OFFA.

On the right is the moneyer's name, written EXCHVN. Which seems like an odd spelling.

It was made at a time when English was only just starting to be written with the Latin alphabet - previously, it had been written using runes. Latin and Old English didn't have all the same sounds, though, so there were teething problems when working out how to spell some words.

Latin, for example, didn't have the 'dg' sound we have in words like 'edge', so there was no obvious letter that English could use. The end solution in Old English was to use 'cg', but that took a while to settle.

Ecghun's solution in the meantime was to import a rune to do the job - ⁊ is the runic character for G.

So this tiny coin is evidence of the earliest stages of English starting to be written with this alphabet. It's a combination of two languages and two writing systems.^[1]

It's a fascinating story which doesn't deserve to be lost in Twitter. It certainly makes you look at English spelling a second time! Thank you, Dr. Wiles, for drawing our attention to it!

- ^[1]Dr Wiles gives as a source Martin Findell & Philip Shaw, "Language Contact in Early Medieval Britain: Settlement, Interaction, and Acculturation", in: W.M. Ormrod &c, *Migrants in Medieval England, c.500-c.1500*, Oxford (2020).↩
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