

Book Scripts of Christian Late Antiquity

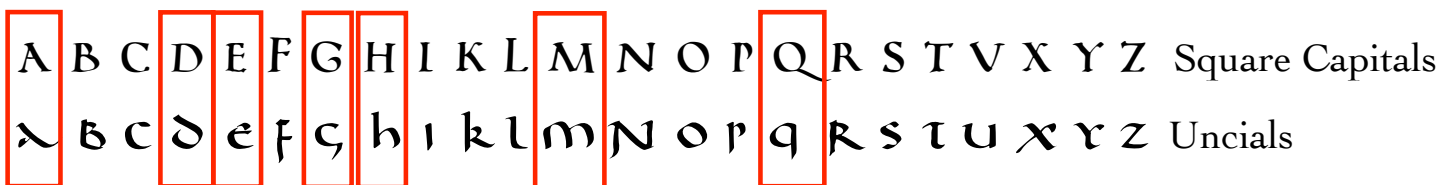
This week, we look at the scripts Uncial and Half-Uncial. These are the main scripts of Christian books that circulated in the late Roman empire and post-Roman realms in late antiquity, and they were thus the model scripts for book production in Latin Christian contexts in the early Middle Ages.

UNCIAL

Half-Uncial is actually a slightly earlier script, but we will look at Uncial first because it bears comparison with the Square Capitals we looked at last week. Uncial and Square Capitals are both majuscule scripts. Just as Square Capitals were used for extremely high-prestige texts in luxury manuscripts in late antiquity (basically only Virgil, as far as we can tell from surviving evidence), Uncial was used for bibles and other high-grade manuscripts from the 5th-8th centuries, especially in Italy and in England, to which Italian Uncial books were imported and used as models. Both Square Capitals and Uncials continued to be used for the rest of the Middle Ages as display scripts (for headings, titles, etc.) in manuscripts primarily written in other scripts.

The name “Uncial” comes from a dismissive remark of Jerome about people who want books with purple parchment or silver or gold letters an inch high — “unciales.” An early-modern paleographer assumed that what we call Uncials (which are large and do occur in shiny, luxury manuscripts, and sometimes even in gold or silver) were the kind of letters Jerome must have been talking about, and so gave that name to that script.

Here is the alphabet in Square Capitals lined up with that in Uncials. We can note the difference in the general aspect of the script: both are spacious and regular, but Uncials are rounded where Square Capitals are pointy. We can also note a few letterforms that have significantly different shapes.

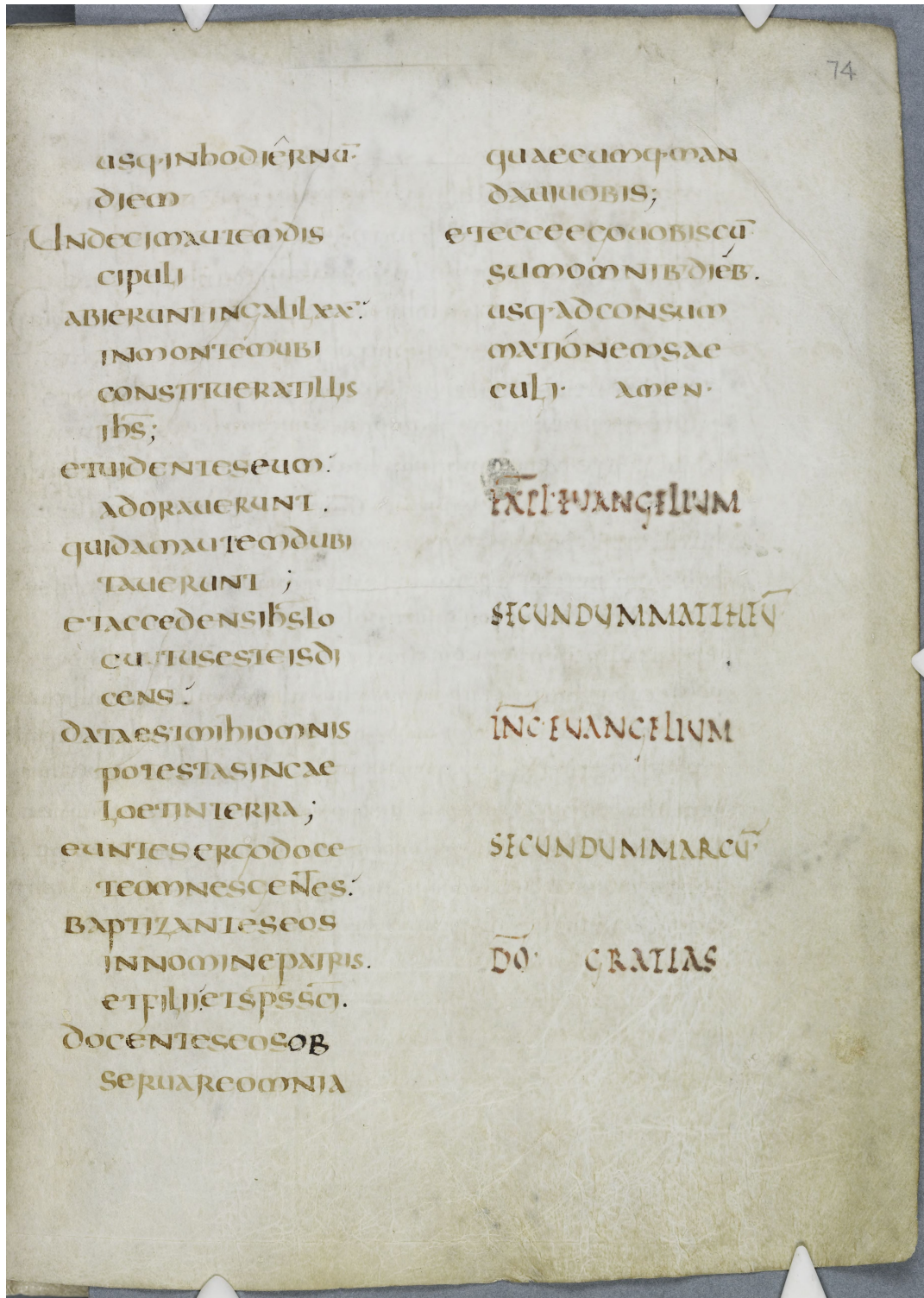


What's different about Uncial?

- A is formed with a swash at right and a bow hanging from it at left, instead of two legs and a crossbar.
- D takes a “lower case” or minuscule form, with the stem leaning over to the left not unlike a minuscule delta, as opposed to our capital D.
- E is curved and looks a bit more like our minuscule e than it does like a capital E. In some versions of Uncial, it has fully the form of our minuscule e, with a closed compartment at top.
- G has a tail.
- h has our minuscule form.
- M has rounded lobes instead of being made of straight lines. Indeed, in later Uncial the M is even more rounded than the form shown here.
- q takes our minuscule form.
- U/V is rounded like a U instead of pointed like a V.

In other words, Uncial is a majuscule script that uses quite a few letters we associate with minuscules.

Here is a page of Uncial in a 6th-century Gospel book, written in Italy and brought by missionaries to England at the end of the 6th century. (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 286, fol. 74r, the Gospels of St Augustine.) The text is the end of the Gospel of Matthew. (Can you tell what script is used for the EXPLICIT of Matthew and INCIPIT of Mark in the second column?) I've transcribed the seven Uncial lines at the top of the right column (adding word spacing and hyphens and expanding abbreviations):



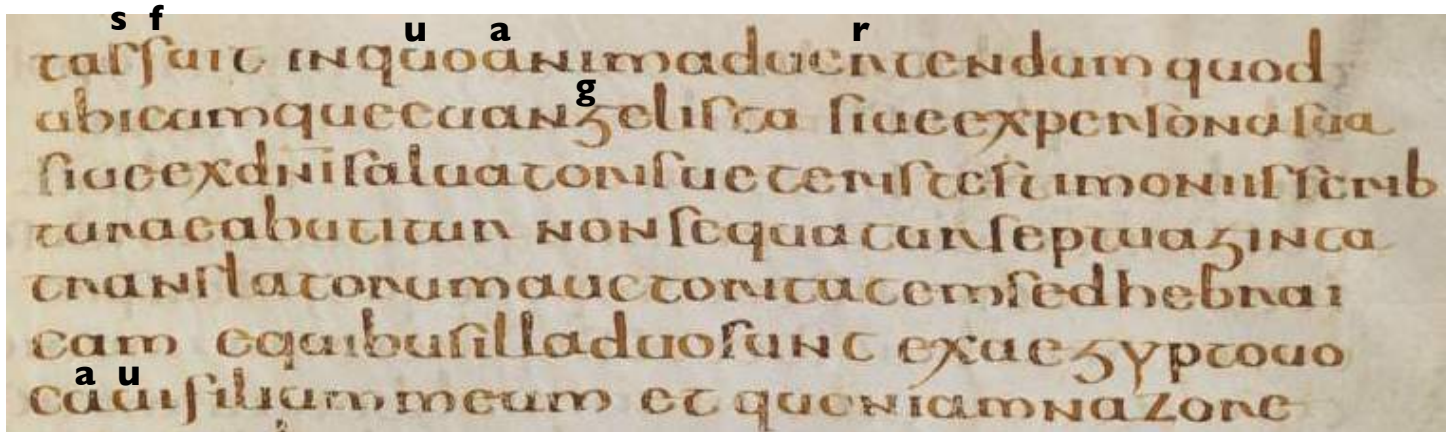
quæcumq(ue) man
dauero uobis;
et ecce ego uobiscu(m)
sum omnib(us) dieb(us)
usq(ue) ad consum
mationem sæ
culi. amen.

HALF-UNCIAL

Half-Uncial is a **minuscule** script used for books from the 3rd-6th centuries. Because Half-Uncial was the script in which so much important Christian literature, like the works of the fathers, the lives of the saints, histories, etc., circulated to newly-Christianized realms in western Europe, it was immensely influential. It is the immediate ancestor of all the early-medieval minuscule scripts, and thus the ultimate ancestor of our lower-case alphabet, through a process we will trace the rest of this term. In Ireland and Irish-influenced northern England, it also became the basis for the high-grade script used in biblical manuscripts like the Lindisfarne Gospels and the Book of Kells.

Despite its name, Half-Uncial is not actually a cut-down version of Uncial. An early paleographer thought it was and gave it that name before scholars had enough evidence to see that Half-Uncial actually developed before Uncial.

Here is a sample of Half-Uncial from a 6th-century Italian manuscript (Bamberg Staatsbibliothek MS Patr. 87, fol. 7r, detail):



The text reads (preserving manuscript spacing at left; modern spacing and hyphenation at right):

tasfuit inquoanimaduertendum quod
ubicumqueeuangelista siueexpersonasua
siueexdnisaluatorisuetertestimoniisscrib-
turaeabutitur nonsequaturseptuaginta
translatorum auctoritatem sed hebrai-
cam equibus illa duosunt exaegyptouo-
cauifilium meum et quoniam nazore-

-tas fuit in quo animaduertendum quod
ubicumque euangelista siue ex persona sua
siue ex d(omi)ni saluatoris ueteris testimoniis scrib-
turae abutitur non sequatur septuaginta
translatorum auctoritatem sed hebrai-
cam e quibus illa duo sunt ex aegypto uo-
caui filium meum et quoniam nazore-

Note the following letters that differ from Uncial:

- **a** has assumed one of its standard minuscule forms, though it is liable to confusion with **u**. (See the u and a one letter apart in the word group **inquoanimaduertendum**.)
- **b**, **d** and **h** have become our lower-case versions with upright ascenders.
- **s** has assumed the form of “tall s,” like a candy cane. It is now very liable to confusion with **f** when the cross-bar of **f** is hard to see, but **f** typically has a tail descending below the baseline to some extent, and **s** does not. Look at them next to each other in **tasfuit** at the beginning of line 1.
- **r** has become our minuscule **r**, though its second stroke tends to lean down to the line and it can look like an **n** to a modern reader (though **N** still has its majuscule form in this script).
- Half-Uncial launches a wild series of versions of minuscule **g** that will be a major help in identifying minuscule scripts from now on. Look at the 5-shaped **g** in the word **euangelista** in the middle of line 2.

ABBREVIATIONS

You have already seen a few abbreviations in last week's and this week's examples. The most common abbreviations of the texts' Latin are:

A dot after Q standing for -que, the enclitic Latin conjunction meaning "and". This appears even in Classical inscriptions.

A line over $\overline{\text{U}}$ standing for a following M. The horizontal superscript line is called a titulus or common mark of abbreviation and is a general sign that something has been abbreviated.

Various symbols showing that the -US of the -BUS ending of the dative and ablative singular have been left off. In the manuscript on the previous page, that symbol is a very faint 7-like or apostrophe-like mark.

These are general for all Latin texts and are joined by more and more abbreviations as the centuries go by. We'll see more in coming weeks.

In texts mentioning God or the persons of the Trinity, there is a set of special abbreviations known as the nomina sacra, "sacred names." These are:

$\overline{\text{DS}}$ **DEUS**

$\overline{\text{DNS}}$ **DOMINUS**

$\overline{\text{IHS}}$ $\overline{\text{XPS}}$ **IESUS CHRISTUS** (The IH and XP are Greek letters, iota-eta and chi-rho, respectively.)

$\overline{\text{SPS}}$ $\overline{\text{SCS}}$ **SPIRITUS SANCTUS**