

The Letter A

By Allan Haley

No one knows why 'A' is the first letter of our alphabet. Some think it's because this letter represents one of the most common vowel sounds in ancient languages of the western hemisphere. Other sources argue against this theory because there were no vowel sounds in the Phoenician language. (The Phoenician alphabet is generally thought to be the basis of the one we use today.)

No one also knows why the 'A' looks the way it does, but we can construct a fairly logical chain of events.

Some say the Phoenicians chose the head of an ox to represent the 'A' sound (for the Phoenicians, this was actually a glottal stop). The ox was a common, important animal to the Phoenicians. It was their main power source for heavy work. Oxen plowed the fields, harvested crops, and hauled food to market. Some sources also claim that the ox was often the main course at meals. A symbol for the ox would have been an important communication tool for the Phoenicians. It somewhat naturally follows that an ox symbol would be the first letter of the alphabet.

The Phoenicians first drew the ox head 'A' as a 'V' with a crossbar to distinguish the horns from the face. They called this letter "alef," the Phoenician word for ox. Through centuries of writing (most of it quickly, with little care for maintaining detail) the alef evolved into a form that looked very different from the original ox head symbol. In fact, by the time it reached the Greeks in about 400 BC, it looked more like our modern 'k' than an 'A'.

The Greeks further changed the alef. First, they rotated it 90° so that it pointed up; then they made the crossbar a sloping stroke. The Greeks also changed the letter name from alef to alpha. Finally, they made the crossbar a horizontal stroke and the letter looked almost as it does today.

The Romans received the Greek alphabet by way of the Etruscan traders of what is now northern Italy. While the Romans kept the design, they again changed the name of the first letter—this time to "ah." The sound "ay," our name for the 'A,' was not common to the Latin language.

The Roman capital letters have endured as the standard of proportion and dignity for almost 2,000 years. They're also the basis of many of the lowercase designs. 'A' is the first letter. There are 25 more stories.

