

the capital letter L

Where did this useful L originate? The Egyptian equivalent of our L was first represented by the image of a lion. Over centuries, this image evolved into a much simpler hieratic character that became the basis of the letter we know today. When the Phoenicians developed their alphabet around 1000 B.C., the 'el' sound was depicted by several more-simplified versions of the hieratic symbol. Some were rounded and some were angular.

From this point in its history on, the L becomes a rather complicated character. It took on a variety of forms, sometimes simultaneously, in just about every alphabet in which it appeared. The Greeks alone had four versions. The Phoenicians called the letter lamedh, which meant "goad," or a "lash." Though a stretch of the imagination, a whip or lash can be seen in the basic shape of the Phoenician letter.

As they did with so many other letters, the Greeks borrowed the basic shape of the Phoenician letter, but made modifications to its design and name. They established the angular quality of the L. The Romans adopted one of the Greek versions of the L, but even then the letter continued to evolve. The first Roman L looked more like an arrow pointing southwest, rather than the right angle of the current form. Over time, the letter evolved into the horizontal and vertical stroked character used on the monumental Trajan column – the same one we write today.

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