

THE LETTERS HE SET

The insular and Gaelic type of the original, and how each letter was identified.

The 1892 book prints Keightley's Anglo-Saxon in insular type and his Irish in Gaelic type. These are not different alphabets; they are different letterforms for letters you already know, the way a blackletter s is still an s. But they are shapes a modern font does not carry, and the Project Gutenberg transcription this edition is set from could not produce them inline. It did the only thing available in 2012: it made a picture of each letter and put the picture in the sentence. There are about a hundred and fifty of them, of nineteen different letters, and they are why Munt-ælfen and siabra could not be searched for, copied, or read aloud by a screen reader in any edition made from that file.

Two things follow, and the second matters more than the first. The first is a question of right: those images are the transcribers' own work of 2012, not Keightley's of 1850, and an edition that pasted them in would be reproducing somebody else's pictures. The second is a question of use: a book whose Old English is made of pictures is a book whose Old English cannot be looked up.

So every one has been replaced by its character. How the mapping was established matters, because getting it wrong would corrupt the very passages the letters exist for. It was not done from the file names, and not from the shapes. Each glyph was read in the words it spells, against Keightley's own glosses in the same sentence. The Anglo-Saxon gave itself away immediately: the sequence that glosses the Greek Oreas spells Munt-ælfen, mountain-elf, and the one that glosses Naias spells Sæ-ælfen, sea-elf, so the letters in question are M, t, f and s. The word Keightley translates in the same breath as Wolf's-fist spells Wulfes-fist. The word he glosses as beast is deor. All eight Anglo-Saxon glyphs resolved that way, and every one is the ordinary Roman letter of its name in an insular hand — which is what modern scholarly practice sets them as. The letters that are genuinely distinct, þ, ð and æ, were already characters in the transcription and are untouched.

The Irish went the same way and was more interesting, because Keightley prints the pronunciation beside the word. The Gaelic letters spelling what he renders deenè mâh are daine mait, the good people; the ones he renders shifra are siabra. Those two transliterations do the whole job. The plain Gaelic letters are ordinary Roman letters in a Gaelic face and are set as such. The three dotted ones — ḃ, ġ, i̇ — carry the séimhiú, the lenition that modern Irish writes as a following h: bh, gh, th. That is why the dotted b of siabra comes out with an f-sound in Keightley's shifra. This edition keeps the dot, because it is what he set and because it keeps his letter count; a reader who prefers the modern spelling can add the h mentally.

The full table, with the evidence for each letter, is kept with the book's source files as glyph-map.json, and the build refuses to run if the source contains an image it cannot account for as either a mapped letter or one of the eight engravings.

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