

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST  
TRANSCRIPTS**

**EPISODE 15:  
ETRUSCANS, ROMANS AND A MODIFIED ALPHABET**

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## **EPISODE 15: ETRUSCANS, ROMANS AND A MODIFIED ALPHABET**

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 15: Etruscans, Romans and a Modified Alphabet.

In this episode, we're going to turn our attention from the eastern Mediterranean to the west – specifically to Italy. In the past few episodes, I've discussed the significant influence of Greek on English. Now we start to look at the tremendous influence of Latin. As I've mentioned in earlier episodes, Modern English is pretty much a blend of Germanic languages and Latin. And, if you look through a Modern English dictionary, you actually have to work to find words that didn't find their way into English through either the Latin or the Germanic languages. I mean, there are obviously words from other sources, but their numbers are tiny in comparison to the words we get from Old English, Old Norse, Latin, French and Greek words that come into English through Latin and French.

As I've looked over my notes in preparing this episode, I came to the very quick realization that I could spend many episodes on Latin and its influences on English. But for now, I am going to focus on the basics. How did Latin emerge from the original Indo-European language? How did Rome emerge as such a powerful city-state? And how did Latin spread from the Italian Peninsula to eventually encompass almost all of continental Europe west of the Rhine? Since a lot of Latin influence on English came with the Norman French in 1066, I'll discuss that part of the story later when we get to the Norman Invasion and the period of Middle English. So for now, the focus will be on the early Latin language and its early influence on the Germanic languages to the north.

And speaking of those Germanic languages, they are also part of this story. As we look at the spread of the Roman Empire and its Latin language into western Europe, we will start to look at the people who inhabited that area, specifically the Celts and the Germanic tribes. But for this episode, we're just going to look at what happened first in Italy.

I should also note that this story also includes the spread of the alphabet. Because the alphabet was exported from Greece and underwent a lot a change by the time the Romans were done with it. And as I have mentioned in the last couple of episodes, I am working on a special series dedicated to the history of the alphabet and each of the letters which we use today. I am still putting that together, and I hope to have it completed very soon. So stay tuned for more information on that.

So let's begin this episode with the arrival of Indo-European-speaking tribes into the Italian Peninsula. The time frame here is not known with any real certainty. The last time I discussed the ancestors of the Latin-speakers was back in Episode 11. I discussed the early expansion of the Indo-European tribes into Europe. And I mentioned that a group of Indo-European tribes had moved around the western side of the Black Sea into the region south of the Carpathian Mountains in the Danube Valley.

As you may recall from that episode, the Carpathian Mountains form a wedge shape on the western side of the Black Sea. And as a result, that mountain range tended to force westward moving tribes either northwestward along the northern side of the Carpathians, or southwestward along the southern side into the Balkans and down into the Danube Valley – basically in the region where the River Danube flows from central Europe into the Black Sea. And I noted back in that episode that it is believed that the ancestors of the Germanic tribes took the northwestern route since that route was a direct path to northern Europe where the Germanic languages and the Germanic-speaking tribes eventually emerged.

For this same reason, many historians believe that the Latin-speakers must have taken the southern route through the Balkan region and the Danube Valley since the Latin speakers ended up in southern Europe in Italy. But not all historians agree with that view. Some believe that the ancestors of the Latin-speakers took essentially the same path as the Germanic-speaking tribes along that northwestern route. And that once they found themselves in north-central Europe, they then migrated southward into Italy. And I just wanted to acknowledge at this point that there are differing views about how the early Latin-speaking tribes found their way into Italy.

Now the version of the story which I presented back in Episode 11 was the southern theory. I suggested that the ancestors of the Latin-speakers had migrated southward from the Black Sea region and were located in the Danube Valley in the Balkan region around the third millennium BC. And I also noted in that episode that some language historians believe that the Indo-European tribes in this region included both the ancestors of the Latin-speaking tribes and the Celtic-speaking tribes. And this is based upon some strong linguistic similarities between those two languages. And it is believed that the ancestors of the Celtic-speaking tribes migrated from this region in the vicinity of modern Hungary. And from there they migrated northward into central Europe in the region around modern Austria and Bavaria. And I will take a much closer look at the Celtic tribes in an upcoming episode. In fact, the story of Modern English is really the story of the convergence of the Latin-speaking Romans from Italy and Germanic-speaking tribes from northern Europe into an area previously occupied by Celtic-speaking people in Britain. So the history of these three groups is essential to our story and is really essential to the overall history of Western Europe.

But for now, let's look back to the Danube Valley where we probably still have the ancestors of the Latin-speakers. Over the next 1500 to 2000 years, we have a general migration of these tribes into Italy. The exact time frames again are not known with any real certainty. But let's keep in mind that it is believed that there were a variety of Indo-European tribes in this region during this time frame.

We have already discussed the migration of tribes from this same region into Greece which led to the destruction of the early Greek Mycenaean civilization and the ultimate expansion and invasion of Sea Peoples throughout the eastern Mediterranean. And the Dorian Greek ancestors are believed to be direct descendants of these migrating tribes. So we know with some certainty that there were tribes in this Balkan region north of Greece, in and around southeastern Europe, around 1200 BC during the time in which Greece was experiencing these pressures and invasions from the north. And it is very possible that these expansions were due to population growth.

And it is also possible that some of these tribes in this region included the ancestors of the Latin-speakers. But again, I say it is possible because there are some historians who advocate this connection. But we may never know for certain whether the Latin-speaking ancestors were part of these tribes.

But we can say that Indo-European tribes were starting to appear in Italy a short time later. By the time of the written history of Italy a few centuries later, most of the people who inhabited Italy spoke Indo-European languages – what we know today as the Italic languages. One group of these tribes settled in an area along the western coast of Italy. These were the ancestors of the Latin speakers. But again, early Latin was only one of several Indo-European languages being spoken in Italy at the time. In fact, the earliest known Latin dialects were actually quite different from the other Indo-European languages being spoken in Italy early on.

Now let's focus in on western Italy because what happened here of the next few centuries would set in motion a series of events which would ultimately define much of the history of the western world.

Some of these Indo-European tribes who spoke a very early version of Latin began to settle in and around the Tiber River in western Italy around 800 BC. This region was surrounded by several hills which afforded these tribes some protection from outside tribes. But keep in mind that these were just a portion of the inter-related Latin-speaking tribes. Some of the other Latin-speaking tribes settled in neighboring territories.

Now this hilly region around the Tiber River would eventually emerge into a settlement which we would come to know as Rome. The actual beginnings of Roman history are obscure. The later-day Romans created their own myths to explain the early history of the city. One famous myth told of twin brothers named Romulus and Remus. They built the early city, and Romulus became the first king, thereby giving the city its name – Rome. Of course, there is a lot more to this mythological story, but it was myth. The actual story is revealed by archaeology.

By around 750 BC, settlers were living in huts on the Palatine Hill which was one of the hills near the Tiber River. Gradually, settlements spread out and began to appear on several of the neighboring hills. About a century later, say around 650 BC, the various settlements joined together to form the city-state of Rome. Now this early settlement of Rome was located at the northern limit of a fertile agricultural region known as Latium. Latium extended up to the Tiber River. And the inhabitants of this general area were known as the Latins. And the language of the people of this region came to be known as Latin. So the name *Latin* came from the region where these Indo-European tribes settled – Latium.

Now as I said, these initial Indo-European settlers in and around the region of Rome were just some of the many competing tribes during this period in and around the same region. Most of these competing tribes also spoke Indo-European languages, including several who spoke early dialects which we would come to know as Latin. All of these tribes had their own gods and customs, and they fought amongst themselves for power and influence. They were shepherds, hunters and farmers. But over time, the peoples who inhabited the hills around the emerging

settlement of Rome began to speak a specific dialect and began to emerge as a distinct group of early people who we can begin to call the ‘Romans.’

But before we go any further in our discussion of the early Romans, we have to stop and consider their immediate neighbors to the north – the Etruscans. The Etruscans are extremely important to this story for two reasons. First, for much of the very early history of Rome, the settlement was under the control and influence of those Etruscans. So even though the Latin-speaking tribes occupied much of early Rome, the emerging city was actually governed and controlled by the Etruscans. And the second reason why the Etruscans are so important is because the alphabet went through them before it got to the Latin-speaking Romans. The Etruscans had borrowed the alphabet from the Greeks and made some basic changes to it. About a century later, the early Latin-speaking Roman took the alphabet from the Etruscans and applied it to their Indo-European language and made some more changes to it.

So let’s take a look at these Etruscans. First, let’s consider the geography for a second. Rome lies about midway along the western coast of Italy. And during these ancient times, the area just to the north of Rome – all the way to the north of modern Italy – was the Etruscan territory. It was basically the northwestern corner of Italy, and it includes modern-day Tuscany and its capital, Florence.

Now the Etruscan civilization was actually in place before the Latin-speaking tribes arrived in the hills around modern Rome. And the first thing to understand about the Etruscans is that they were not Indo-Europeans. Historians don’t know exactly where the Etruscans came from but they seem to have emerged as a distinct civilization in the eighth century BC. Grave evidence confirms that the Etruscans were in Italy by 750 BC. And this would have been shortly before, or around the same time, that the first Indo-Europeans were beginning to settle into the territory that would eventually emerge as Rome. So that makes the Etruscan civilization the first civilized society in Italy. The Etruscans built cities, they engaged in commerce, and they had a very advanced culture.

Now the Etruscans were similar to the Phoenicians in many respects. They were both a loose collection of city-states. And they were both focused primarily on trade and commerce – not military conquest or empire. And like the Phoenicians, the Etruscans did not have a strong central government. This weakness would have major implications for the civilization later on. But for now, it was a quickly emerging commercial and cultural power in northern Italy. Again, this was a time when Rome would have been nothing more than a simple village (if even that).

In terms of the Etruscan civilization itself, their art was superb and it rivaled the best art of classical Greece. The Etruscans also built sophisticated roads, drains and aqueducts. They were very skilled metal workers who produced high-quality products from the tin, copper, iron and gold that was abundant within the Etruscan hills. And this is one of the main reasons why the Greeks were so interested in the Etruscan civilization. The Greeks were interested in the metals, as well as the metal artwork and other artifacts produced by the Etruscans. The Etruscans began trading these goods across the Mediterranean and into Europe itself. And by the seventh Century BC, they were trading heavily with the Greeks who supplied the Etruscans with a variety of

luxury goods. The Etruscans are also famous for the works of art – including frescoes and decorated urns.

Now let's turn to the Etruscan language. As I said earlier, the Etruscan civilization was not an Indo-European civilization. The Etruscan language was distinct and was unlike any other known language in the ancient world.

The origin of the Etruscans is a mystery. The Greek historian Herodotus said they came from Lydia in Anatolia. And many later-day Roman historians also accepted this theory. Lydia was an area of Anatolia near the Hittite Empire, and the Lydian language was closely related to Hittite within the Anatolian family of languages. So that means Lydian and Hittite were both Indo-European languages. But the Etruscan language was not an Indo-European language. The Greek historian Dionysius said that the Etruscans were native people who had inhabited this region of Italy from the earliest known times. And he noted that they did not speak a Lydian language. Today, historians are still divided on the issue. But one thing we can say is that, regardless of their origin, the Etruscan language was definitely not Indo-European.

Most of what is known about the language comes from a small number of inscriptions which have been discovered. About 10,000 brief inscriptions have survived in Etruscan, but linguists have had a very difficult time translating those inscriptions. And only about 100 root words have been translated with any degree of accuracy. But these translations reveal that some of these words may have filtered down in the Roman settlement to the south and found their way into later-day Latin, and eventually found their way into Modern English.

The Modern English word *histrionics* comes from the Latin *hister* which meant actor. And the Latin word *hister* may have come from the Etruscan language.

Also, words like *person*, *personal* and *persona* came from the Latin word *persona*. This word may have come from the Etruscan word *phersu* which meant 'mask' in Etruscan.

The modern English word *atrium* comes from Latin, but it too may have had Etruscan origins.

Words like *military* and *militia* come from a Latin root word *mīles* which meant 'soldier' in Latin and, again, may have come from Etruscan.

The Modern English word *satellite* also came from Latin but may have originally derived from the Etruscan word *satelles* which meant 'bodyguard.'

So these are just some examples Etruscan words which found their way into Latin and eventually into English. But there were quite a few other Etruscan words which entered Latin and did not make their way to English.

But what's really interesting here is the connection between the Etruscans and the Greeks. Remember from our discussion of the Greeks in earlier episodes that the Greeks had established colonies throughout the northern Mediterranean. And this included colonies in Sicily and

southern Italy. And these Greek influences poured into the early Etruscan civilization. And both Etruscan and Greek influences began to pour into the emerging settlement at Rome as well.

Because of their extensive contacts with the Greeks and the Greek colonies, the Etruscans began to borrow words from the Greeks, especially words related to ships and shipping. Of the total number of Etruscan words which passed into later-day Latin, about 25% of the Etruscan words came from Greek origins. And when nautical terms are taken into account, the proportion rises to 75% being from Greek origin. And among the words which came from Greek via Etruscan were the Latin words for ant, cloak, mask, steering oar and pretty boy. It should also be noted that the Etruscan words for wineskin flask, handled cup, jug, and oil bottle also closely resemble the Greek words for such items.

But for purposes of the history of English, the most important thing the Etruscans borrowed from the Greeks was not some words, it was the Greek alphabet. Just as the Greeks had discovered and adopted the alphabet through their trading connections with the Phoenicians, the same thing happened again here. The Etruscans encountered the Greek traders, and they too discovered the alphabet which the Greeks had been using for about a century. So they did just what the Greeks had done. They took the alphabet and applied it to their language.

It appears that the Etruscans adopted the alphabet from the Greeks around 700 BC – maybe a bit earlier. That was about a century after the Greeks had adopted it from the Phoenicians. A writing tablet has been unearthed from an Etruscan tomb near Florence which dates to around 660 BC. The tablet frame has 26 letters written from right to left. And they are identical to the letters used in western Greece which suggests that the Etruscans borrowed the letters from the Greeks initially in their exact same form. A clue as to the date of the inscription is the fact that the list of letters omits the final Greek letter Omega which appeared in the Greek alphabet around 660 BC. Therefore, this Etruscan tablet was likely created prior to that date – prior to 660 BC.

The Greek letter Omega never made it to the Etruscan alphabet. And the Etruscans eventually dropped five other Greek letters which represented sounds that didn't exist in Etruscan. The Etruscan language apparently had no 'b' sound, no 'd' sound, and no 'g' sound. Linguists call these sounds 'voiced stops' and apparently Etruscan did not use voiced stops at all in the language.

Now there are unvoiced versions of these sounds. The unvoiced version of 'b' is 'p.' And the unvoiced version of the 'd' sound is the 't' sound. And the unvoiced version of the 'g' sound is the 'k' sound. And the Etruscan language had all of these unvoiced sounds – the 'p' sound, the 't' sound and the 'k' sound. And if you remember back to the episode I did about the letter C, this is part of what happened to that letter at this point. Remember that the third letter in Greek was gamma and it had the 'g' sound. But as I just said, the Etruscans didn't have a 'g' sound. They only had the unvoiced version of that sound which was the 'k' sound. So the third letter 'gamma' was pronounced by the Etruscans with a 'k' sound because they didn't have a 'g' sound. And that is ultimately how the Romans inherited it. And that is why the third letter became the modern letter C in Latin and was used to represent the 'k' sound just as the Etruscans had used it.

And that was just one of many changes which occurred to the alphabet during the time that the Etruscans used it. And I will discuss those changes in much more detail in the alphabet series which I will be releasing soon. But the key here is that Greek was an Indo-European language and the Etruscan language was not. So the Etruscans had to make changes to the alphabet to make it fit their language.

This was the same process that the Greeks had to go through when they tried to apply the Phoenician alphabet to their language. And when the Romans later borrowed the alphabet from the Etruscans, they also had to make some significant changes because, at that point, the alphabet was moving from a non-Indo-European language (Etruscan) to an Indo-European language (Latin). So once again, changes had to be made to make the sounds work in that language. It is interesting though, that the alphabet has undergone relatively few changes by comparison since the Romans adopted it. And at least as it relates to English, that is partly due to the fact that English and Latin are both Indo-European languages. English didn't have to make a lot of changes to the Roman alphabet because both languages generally have the same sounds. I mean, there was some differences between Latin phonemes and Old English phonemes, but compared to non-Indo-European languages, the differences were minimal, and therefore very few changes had to be made to the alphabet to make it fit English.

Now once the Etruscans had borrowed the alphabet from the Greeks and adapted it to their language, it quickly spread throughout the Etruscan territory. And this is a recurring theme at this point. Just like in Greece, as soon as a new society discovered and borrowed the alphabet into their language, literacy quickly spread throughout the society since the alphabet was so easy to learn and master.

And because of the power and influence of the Etruscan civilization in Italy (especially northern Italy), the alphabet quickly spread out from the Etruscan territory to the non-Etruscan people who lived around them and throughout northern Italy. And this included the Latin-speaking Romans to their south who inherited the alphabet from the Etruscans around 600 BC. So around 800 BC the Greeks had borrowed the alphabet, and around 700 BC the Etruscans had borrowed it, and around 600 BC the Romans had borrowed it. So we're moving in 100 year increments, and that illustrates how quickly the alphabet was spreading throughout the Mediterranean.

One other quick note about Etruscan writing before we turn our attention back to the Romans. The Etruscans wrote sentences in both directions – left-to-right and right-to-left, but they preferred to write from right-to-left like the original Phoenicians and the early Greeks had done. So it's not until we get to the Romans that we finally see a consistent change to the left-to-right style of writing that we use today.

So with the Etruscan civilization firmly entrenched in northwestern Italy, and with a new alphabet for writing their language, we can now turn our attention back to that early settlement to the south which was slowly emerging as the city of Rome. But when we left Rome, it wasn't really a city yet. We had some Indo-European tribes who spoke an early version of Latin. They lived in huts in the hills around the Tiber River in the area which will eventually become Rome.



They herded sheep and cattle and maintained goats and pigs. Each of the seven hills of Rome was probably a separate village at this early point.

But as the settlement, or various settlements, grew and began to emerge as an actual city, it soon fell under the control of the powerful Etruscan civilization which again was located immediately north of the city. It's unclear if early Rome was under Etruscan control from the very beginning of the settlement or if Etruscans invaded at some point as it began to grow. But we can say with some certainty that Rome was governed by Etruscan kings by the time it emerged as an actual city-state.

The Etruscan kings united the various settlements in the seven hills into an actual unified city. We're now at about 600 BC. And we can finally think of Rome as an actual city for the first time.

There is no doubt that the Etruscans helped to develop the city of Rome. The influence was so great during this early period that we think of early Rome as basically an Etruscan city. Its leaders and its culture was essentially Etruscan. But its inhabitants were Latin-speaking Indo-Europeans. And this dichotomy was bound to create long-term conflicts, which it ultimately did. The city came to be known as *Romulus*, which as you may recall was the name that the later-day Romans gave to the mythical king who supposedly built the city. So that name *Romulus* had been around from the beginning and you can probably see how the later Romans would have incorporated it into their founding myth.

Now the Etruscans not only ruled over Rome, they also heavily influenced its early culture. In fact, we often take note of the Greek influence on Roman culture. But the Etruscans influence is often overlooked. In military and political matters, the Romans borrowed heavily from the Etruscans. They imitated the clothing of the Etruscan nobility. In fact, one of the most iconic symbols of the Roman army is the military standard topped with a bronze eagle. But you might not know that the Romans actually borrowed that from the Etruscans. And if you're a fan of Roman military history, you probably know that Roman generals famously wore scarlet military cloaks in battle. Again, this idea was taken from the Etruscans.

Since we're talking about Etruscan influence on the Romans, and since this is a podcast about the History of English, we now have to talk about the big event which happened next because we live with the consequences of this event every single day.

Around 600 BC, those Latin-speaking people in the settlement that we can now officially call the new city of Rome borrowed one more thing from the Etruscans, and that was the alphabet.

As I mentioned earlier, the Etruscans had borrowed the alphabet from the Greeks around 700 BC. So the Romans had borrowed it from the Etruscans only a century later. And even though the Etruscans hadn't been using the alphabet for very long, they had made some significant changes to it in order to make it fit their non-Indo-European language. But now the Romans were borrowing this modified alphabet from a non-Indo-European language back into another Indo-European language – in this case Latin.

As I mentioned earlier, the alphabet is based entirely around the sounds or phonemes of languages. And when you move from one language family to another, the phonemes can change significantly. And languages don't always share the same sounds. So some letters become useless, and other letters have to be invented to make the alphabet fit the new language. And that's exactly what those early Romans had to do when they took the alphabet from the Etruscans. And once the Romans were done with it, they had created an alphabet which is basically the same alphabet that we use today in Modern English.

Now let's keep in mind that Rome was just a fledgling settlement that we can barely call a city at this point. And it was ruled by Etruscan kings and was heavily influenced by the neighboring Etruscan civilization which was now at its peak.

So these Latin-speaking people in and around Rome were just looking for a way to write their own native language in this new form of writing called an alphabet. And the Etruscans would have probably considered that very early version of Latin to be a semi-barbarian language at the time.

A ceramic wine container dated to around 620 BC has been found around Rome which contains the Etruscan alphabet, but it spells words in Latin. The inscription identifies the owner and maker of the container. And another inscription dating from the same time frame also contains Etruscan writing, but again the words are Latin. This indicates that the Latin-speakers had adopted, or were beginning to adopt, the Etruscan alphabet by around 620 BC. From that date until around 250 BC (so around 350 years), historians and archaeologists have discovered 650 inscriptions written in the early Latin alphabet.

Now in the case of the Greek and Phoenician alphabets, we have letter lists. In other words, we have their version of the ABCs in order from A – or alpeh or alpha – to the final letter in the alphabet. Now if you think about it, there is no particular reason for having all of the letters organized in a particular order. A before B, and B before C, and so on. But all languages with alphabets do it. And linguists believe that the ordering of the letters in the alphabet is simply a memory device. It makes it easier to learn the letters if you can learn them all in a particular order. And so one of the first things children do is learn their ABCs in order.

However, out of all of the early Latin inscriptions from 620 BC to 250 BC, there are no alphabet lists. It is almost certain that the Romans had them, because when the lists finally do appear later, the letters are still in basically the same order that the Greeks and Etruscans had used. But without a specific alphabet list, linguists have had to look closely at the surviving inscriptions to determine how many letters the Romans were actually using. And based on that research, it appears that the Romans were using 21 letters during this period.

The Etruscans had stopped using the Greek letter for the 'o' sound, so the Romans brought that letter back. And remember that the Etruscan language didn't have a 'b' sound, or a 'd' sound or a 'g' sound. But of course Latin did have those sounds. So the Romans re-shuffled the forms and the sounds of the letters for those three sounds.

So, as you may recall from an earlier episode, the third letter which the Greeks had called ‘gamma’ with a ‘g’ sound now came into Latin with the Etruscan ‘k’ sound since the Etruscan language didn’t have the ‘g’ sound. So the third letter became the Roman letter C with a ‘k’ sound. But whereas the Etruscans didn’t have a ‘g’ sound, the Romans did have a ‘g’ sound. So they eventually had to create a new letter for the ‘g’ sound which became the Roman letter G. And that is why the uppercase C and the uppercase G resemble each other.

And there was also a reason why the new letter G was placed in the seventh position after letter F. The seventh letter of the Etruscan alphabet had the ‘Z’ or ‘zed’ sound which the Etruscans had borrowed from the Greeks. But unlike Greek and Etruscan, early Latin didn’t have the ‘z’ or ‘zed’ sound. So the seventh letter – called ‘zay’ by the Etruscans – was unnecessary in Latin. So the early Romans got rid of ‘zay’ and put the new letter G in its place. Of course, the letter ‘zay’ would reappear during the classical Roman period when the Romans started to borrow a lot of words from Greek, and they suddenly needed to represent the ‘z’ sound again. So at that point, they reintroduced the letter as Z or ‘zed’ and put it at the end of the alphabet.

I should also note that the Romans tinkered with the letter F as well. Up to this point the sixth letter of the alphabet represented the ‘w’ sound in Greek and Etruscan. The Romans moved this sound nearer to the back of the alphabet and that freed up the 6<sup>th</sup> letter. Now the Greeks and the Etruscans didn’t actually have an ‘f’ sound in their respective languages. Remember from way back in an earlier episode, that the Greek had a ‘pf’ sound that was probably a sound that was in transition from the original ‘p’ sound to an ‘f’ sound. And you may remember that this was one of the sound changes that Jacob Grimm had also noticed within the Germanic languages. And that’s the change which distinguishes Germanic *father* from the Latin *pater*. And you may remember that the Greek had invented a new letter called ‘phi’ (they probably called it /fee/) to cover that in-between ‘pf’ sound. And that was as close as the Greeks came to an ‘f’ sound. But the Romans did have an ‘f’ sound in Latin. And that Greek sound ‘phi’ was by this point being pronounced simply as an ‘f’ sound just like we do today in words like *phone* and *philosophy* because that sound had completed its transition to the ‘f’ sound by this point. So the Romans had to find a way to write the ‘f’ sound since the alphabet they borrowed from the Etruscans did not have a letter for the ‘f’ sound. So they used that sixth letter which had previously represented the ‘w’ sound, but was now free. So our modern letter F with the ‘f’ sound was born. And the Romans decided to use that letter for native Latin words. But for those Greek words which were being borrowed into Latin, they chose to use the ‘PH’ combination to represent the original Greek letter ‘phi.’ So that is why we still have that ‘PH’ spelling for the ‘f’ sound in Modern English. It represents words that borrowed into Latin from Greek which had that original ‘phi’ letter to represent that in-between ‘pf’ sound.

Now these are just a few of the changes the Romans made to the alphabet. And the examples I just gave cover several centuries of Roman history. So the Roman letter changes occurred over many years. And this is a good point to mention again the alphabet series which I hope to have available very shortly. And that series will focus on all of these changes in much more detail.

But the basic point here is that the very early Romans borrowed the Etruscan alphabet around 600 BC, when Rome was barely a city, and they began to modify the alphabet to make it fit Latin which was a quite different language from the Etruscan language.

And much like the Etruscans and Greeks who preceded them, the early Romans wrote sentences in both directions – right-to-left and left-to-right. But over time, as I mentioned earlier, they settled on the same left-to-right approach which we use today.

So we now have the emerging city-state of Rome, governed by Etruscan kings, infiltrated with Etruscan culture, and using a modified Etruscan alphabet. But the Romans remember were not Etruscans. They were Latin-speaking Indo-Europeans. And the power in this relationship was almost ready to change hands.

So next time, I am going to look at the rise of Rome as an independent city-state – and eventually as an imperial power. And along the way, I am going to begin looking at Latin words and phrases from this period which are still found in Modern English. So next time, it's all about the rise of the Roman Empire.

So until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.