



# ALPHABETIC ADAPTATIONS ON THE APENNINE PENINSULA

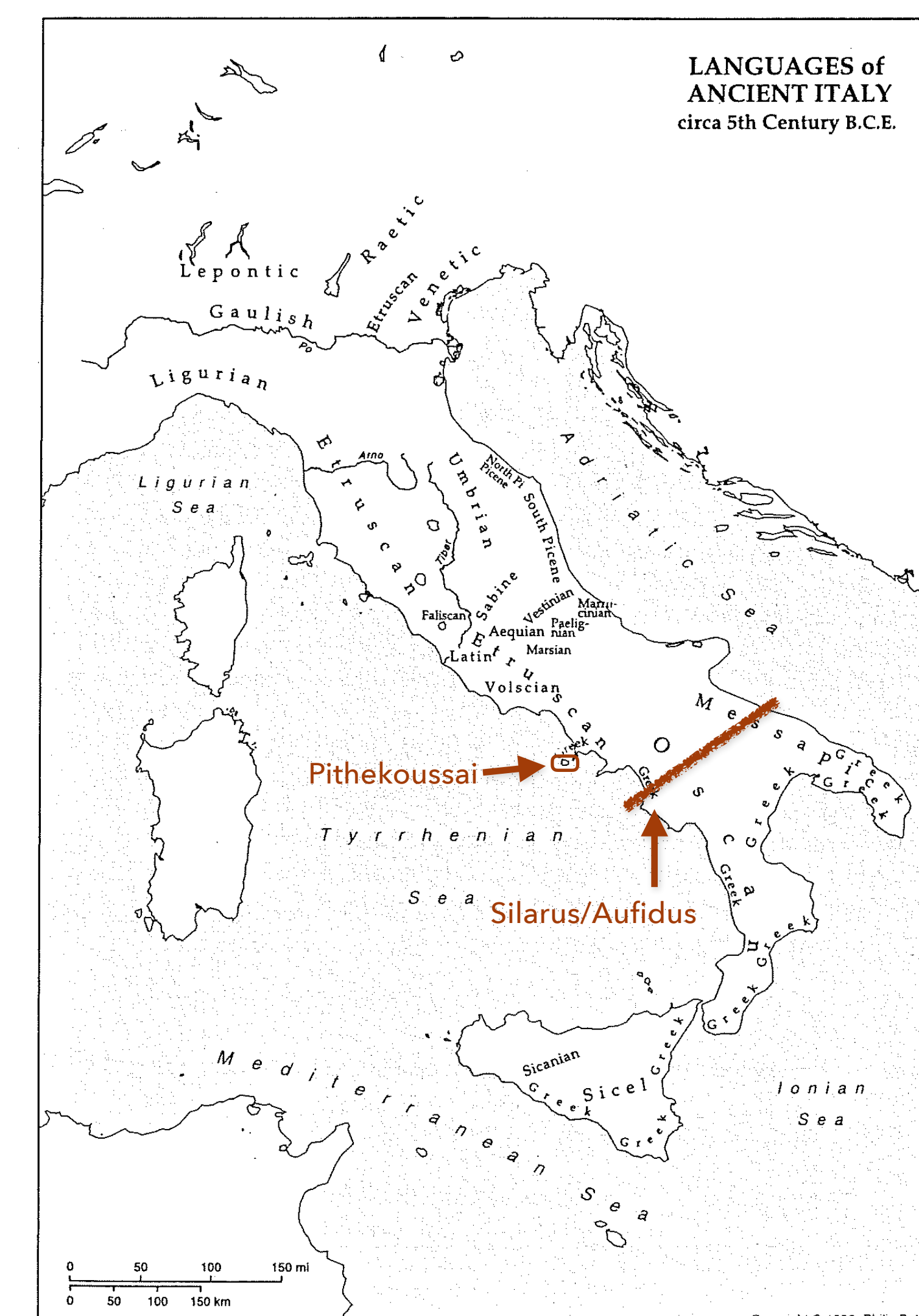
Writing was brought to the Apennine peninsula in the late 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE, when **colonizing Greeks from Euboea**, north of Attica, settled on the isle Pithekoussai (mod. Ischia) outside the Bay of Naples. This marks the entry of the peninsula into the historical period.

During the centuries to follow, settlers from various Greek city states founded colonies along the southern coasts of the peninsula, and brought with them the alphabets in use in their home states. In this multitude of scripts, the line created by the two rivers the Silarus (Sele) and the Aufidus (Ófanto) became a lasting boundary between the **Greek influence** in the south, tied to settlements such as Poseidonia (Paestum) by the mouth of the Silarus, and the northern region, where the **Etruscans**, speakers of a non-Indo-European language, were the culturally more pronounced ethnic group.

There are Etruscan inscriptions from late 8<sup>th</sup> century aristocratic graves in Tarquinia, and subsequent attestations of Etruscan writing in other cities in South Etruria, such as Caere and Vulci. From the 6<sup>th</sup> century onwards Etruscan inscriptions are found in the more remote and peripheral Etruscan-speaking regions

(Bagnasco Gianni 2010, 115-116; Maras 2016, 206). In the earliest Etruscan inscriptions the script is very similar to the **Euboean alphabet**, but during the centuries to follow the Etruscan scribes successively calibrated the technique of writing to fit their own language (Pandolfini and Prosdociami 1990, 11-15; Maras 2016, 201). The resulting **Etruscan alphabet**, in different stages of modification, came to influence several of the tribes in the central and northern parts of the peninsula, who eventually came to develop their own individual scripts, all based on the Etruscan modified alphabet.

The project *Archaic Spelling Reforms: Alphabetic Adaptations on the Apennine Peninsula* analyzes adaptations visible in the scripts in the central and northern parts of the peninsula, and the spread of writing in terms of technical knowledge. The project studies the individual scripts devised and used by the **Latins**, the **Faliscans**, the **Umbrians**, the **Picenes**, the **Veneti**, along that used by the speakers of **Oscan** north of the Silarus-Aufidus line. Aspects that are analyzed include the writing of voiced stops, the spelling of /f/, and the number of vowels in a given script.



Archaic languages on the Apennine peninsula, c. 450 BCE.  
Image: *The Foundations of Latin* (1998), Philip Baldi. Markings: KWT.

	/b/	/g/	/d/	/k/	/f/
<b>Eastern Greek</b>	Β	Γ	Δ	Κ	-
<b>Etruscan (8th-7th cent.)</b>	(B)	(C)	(D)	C/K/Q	FB
<b>Etruscan (6th cent.)</b>	-	-	-	K	8
<b>Oscan (late 5th cent.)</b>	B	C	R	K	8
<b>Picene (6th-5th cent.)</b>	B	C	D	K	8
<b>Latin (7th-4th cent.)</b>	(B)	-	D	C/K/Q	FB
<b>Latin (3rd-2nd cent.)</b>	B	G	D	C	F
<b>Sabine (7th-5th cent.)</b>	B	-	D	K	8
<b>Faliscan (7th-4th cent.)</b>	-	-	D	C/K/Q	↑
<b>Umbrian (4th - 3rd cent.)</b>	B	-	P → T	K	8
<b>Venetic (6th-4th cent.)</b>	ϕ	χ	ζ	K	FB

Examples of alphabetic adaptations in some of the alphabets on the Apennine peninsula. (The direction of writing has been normalized to left-to-right.) Dotted boundaries mark alphabetic developments unique to a particular script. Scripts that do not feature signs for voiced stops use the corresponding sign for the voiceless stop. In early Etruscan inscriptions there are three signs that write the voiceless velar, <C>, <K> and <Q>, in complementary distribution in different phonological contexts, the so-called "C/K/Q-convention". This velar triad system was initially copied also into the writing of Latin and Faliscan.

## THE ADAPTATION OF WRITING

In the Etruscan language the feature [+ voice] was not a distinguishing feature, and there was thus no need for the Greek signs *beta* <B> and *delta* <D>. The Greek *gamma* (written <C> in the Euboean alphabet), was continued in the Etruscan script, recharacterized to mark /k/. The Etruscan language *did* distinguish /f/, and at first a digraph was created, <FB> (featuring the Greek *digamma* /w/ and the sign for aspiration), later on simplified to <8> (a rounded version of <B>), which was variously continued in the different alphabets (see table left).

The lack of signs for voiced stops imposed limitations in the writing of the Italic languages, as scribes of these tongues adapted the Etruscan alphabet to their own respective languages. To some extent differences between the various Italic alphabets depend on when and where the Etruscan script was encountered. The **South Picene** and **Oscan alphabets** feature complete sets of signs for voiced stops, possibly due to (partial) Greek influence. However, since the Oscan script featured Etr. sign <D> for /r/, Oscan scribes instead created <R> for the writing of /d/ (Adiego 2015, 17).

The alphabets further up north solved the issue of writing voiced stops in different ways. The **Faliscan, Latin** and **Sabine alphabets** stem from a version of the Etruscan script in use in southern Etruria, probably dating to the 7<sup>th</sup> or early 6<sup>th</sup> century (Bakkum 2009, 379-380). All three scripts have <D> for /d/, and Latin and Sabine write <B> for /b/ (Faliscan uses only <P>). There is, at first, no sign for /g/, but the sign <C> was used to write both velar sounds, /g/ and /k/ (on the "C/K/Q-convention", see left). A specific sign for /g/ was created in the Latin alphabet only in the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, with a diacritical mark added to <C> making <G>.

In the **Venetic** and **Umbrian alphabets** the problem of writing voiced stops was solved in yet a different way. The **Umbrian alphabet** featured a sign <B>, although this was very irregularly used (Tikkanen 2019). There was also initially a new sign <P> for /d/, although from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE this marks a spirantized /r/, and /d/ is written using <T> (Meiser 1986, 218-24; Calderini 2011, 24). The **Venetic alphabet** introduced the Greek signs <ϕ>, <ζ> and <χ> for /b/, /d/, and /g/ respectively (Fogolari and Prosdociami 1988, 328-51).

## CONCLUSION

The Apennine peninsula constitutes a micro-climate within which it is possible to study the evolution of several different alphabets. Several of the archaic Italic scripts were based on the Etruscan alphabet, in itself an adaptation from the Eastern Greek alphabet used on Euboea.

Some of the adaptations visible in the new alphabets can be analyzed as due to complementary distribution. The presence of <B> and <D> in several of these scripts is often explained as through Greek influence, but they can also be attributed to the Etruscan teachers, who might have transmitted the alphabet in the same row as it was taught to them (the change of letter names is thought to have taken place within the Etruscan language continuum). But whereas <B> and <D> seem to have been included in the Italic *abecedaria* fairly easily – Faliscan and Umbrian (irregular <B>) the only apparent exceptions –, in several scripts <C> was used to write voiceless velar /k/, as in Etruscan. Only scripts that had Gr. <K> for /k/ could feature Gr. <C> for /g/, as in the **South Picene** and **Oscan alphabet**. Scripts in which <C>

was used for /k/, meaning all scripts based on the **northern Etruscan** alphabet, present alternative solutions (see table above). The same kind of "problem" caused the creation of **Osc.** <R> and **Umbr.** <P> for /d/, since both alphabets featured <D> for /r/, as in Etruscan (Adiego 2015, 17; Tikkanen 2019 and forthcoming).

Other adaptations are due to different levels of external cultural influence, as well as internal stress. The **Venetic** script features the archaic Etr. digraph <FB> with no apparent simplification. South Picene, Oscan, Sabine and **Umbrian** have <8> for /f/, from the simplified version of the Etruscan script (with the second sign in the digraph), whereas the later Latin alphabet has <F>. **Faliscan**, finally, has an individual sign <↑> for /f/, coined earlier than the Etruscan digraph, evidently caused by the stress of writing out the name of their own ethnic.

In short, the technique of writing was variously received by the different communities on the Apennine peninsula. The different outcomes reflect both old patterns of interconnectedness amongst the early populations on the peninsula (see Blake 2014), as well as different patterns of centralisation with distinct scribal schools, with more standardized spelling and orthography.

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