The Alphabet

Johanna Drucker: The Alphabetic Labyrinth
Sergio Polano: ABC of 20th-century graphics

The history of the alphabet begins in Ancient Egypt, more than a millennium into the history of writing. The first pure alphabets emerged around 2000 BC in Egypt, as a representation developed by Semitic workers in Egypt of their own language (see Middle Bronze Age alphabets), deriving the system from the partly alphabetic principles (besides syllabic and logographic values) of the Egyptian hieroglyphs. Most other alphabets in the world today either descended from this one development, including the Phoenician alphabet, the Greek alphabet, and the Latin alphabet, or were directly or indirectly inspired by its design.

AFFILIATION OF EGYPTIAN AND SEMITIC ALPHABETS.

Values.	Hieroglyphic.		Hieratic.	Phœnician.	Greek.	Roman.	Hebrew.	
	EGYPTIAN.			SEMITIC.	LATER EQUIVALENTS.			
a	eagle				A	A	א	1
ȯ	crane				B	B	ב	2
ḳ (g)	throne				Γ	C	ג	3
ṭ (d)	hand				Δ	D	ד	4
h	mæander				E	E	ה	5
f	cerastes				Y	F	ו	6
z	duck				Ꙇ	Z	ז	7
χ (kh)	sieve				H	H	ח	8
θ (th)	tongs				Θ	…	ט	9
i	parallels				I	I	י	10
k	bowl				K	K	כ	11
l	lioness				Λ	L	ל	12
m	owl				M	M	מ	13
n	water				N	N	נ	14
s	chairback				Ξ	X	ס	15
ȧ	…….	….	…. ……		O	O	ע	16
p	shutter				Π	P	פ	17
t' (ts)	snake				…	…	צ	18
q	angle				…	Q	ק	19
r	mouth				P	R	ר	20
š (sh)	inundated garden				Σ	S	ש	21
t	lasso				T	T	ת	22
	I.	II.	III.	IV.	V.	VI.	VII.	

Affiliation of Egyptian and
Semitic alphabets (Isaac Taylor,
The Alphabet, London, 1883)

	SEMITIC ALPHABETS.			GREEK ALPHABETS.						
	Phonetic Values.	Modern Square Hebrew.	Primitive Semitic.	First Epoch. r. to l.	Second Epoch. l. to r.	Third Epoch. Eastern.	Third Epoch. Western.	Fourth Epoch. Greek.	Fourth Epoch. Latin.	Phonetic Values.
1	'a	א	∢	A	A	A	A	A	A	a
2	b	ב	𝕴	S 𐤁	B	B	B	B	B	b
3	g	ג	𐤂	↑	⌐	Γ	⟨	Γ	C G	c, g
4	d	ד	△	△	△	△	▷	Δ	D	d
5	h	ה	ヨ	𝄃	℟	E	℟	E	E	e
6	v	ו	Y	Y	℣	Y V	F Y V	V Y	F V	f, v, u
7	z	ז	⊐	I	I	I	I	Z	...	z
8	ch	ח	⨸	𝖡	⯊	H	H	H	H	ē, h
9	ṭ	ט	⊕	⊗	⊗	⊗ ①	⊕	Θ ⊖ φ	...	th, ph
10	y	י	⊐	∤	⟩	I	I	I	I	i
11	k	כ	ᵞ	⤞	k	K X	K	K X	...	k, kh
12	l	ל	𝒢	∨⊣٦	⌐ ∧	∧	L	∧	L	l
13	m	מ	ᵞ	ᵜ	ᵜ	M	M	M	M	m
14	n	נ	⅄	⅄	N	N	N	N	N	n
15	s	ס	⧺	⊞	⊞	⊞	＋	Ξ	X	x
16	'a	ע	○	o	o	O Ω	o	O Ω	O	o
17	p	פ	⅂	ᒣ	Γ	Γ	Γ	Π	P	p
18	ts	צ	ᚦ	⋁	M	..	M	...	...	s
19	q	ק	φ	Φ	⍾	...	⍾	...	Q	q
20	r	ר	ᑫ	⅑	⍴	P	R	P	R	r
21	sh	ש	w	⟩	⟨	Σ	⟨	Σ	S	s
22	t	ת	X	T	T	T	T	T	T	t
	I.	II.	III.	IV.	V.	VI.	VII.	VIII.		

Transmission of Semitic forms
(Isaac Taylor, *The Alphabet*,
London, 1883)

The linguistic structure of Semitic languages is centered on word roots, or morphemes, which have a consonantal structure. In such a language a

Monumental Roman capitals from the base of Trajan's Column, Rome

A B C
G H I
N O P
T V W

Renaissance form of Roman majuscules, inspired by classical models, by Serlio, 16th century (Lewis F. Day, *Alphabets Old and New*, 1910)

Papyrus scrolls, wax tablets, lead, gold and silver foil were all materials used for written documents in addition to which inscriptions were frequently scratched through, or painted onto, pottery glazes. Monumental stone engravings increased in scale and number throughout antiquity, with a high degree of aesthetic achievement in both the Greek and Roman period. The Latin alphabet, as has been mentioned, was not a direct descendant of the Ionian alphabet of the Greeks, but a development with a common early antecedent. The alphabet eventually adopted by the Romans came from the Etruscans, through settlements in and around the city of Cumae on the ancient Italian peninsula. Some of these settlers had come from Boeotia and Euboia on the eastern side of the Greek mainland, and some from the island of Pithekoussai. The Romans made their own modifications. They were responsible for the superbly designed monumental capitals which are still copied by calligraphers and stone carvers in contemporary lettering. But they also saw the need for additional letters. In 44 AD the emperor Claudius introduced three new symbols, a vertical *digamma* for 'V,' an *anti-sigma* for the *ps* and *bs* sound, and another symbol to represent the long 'u' sound. Distinctions between 'V,' 'U,' and 'W' as well as between 'I' and 'J' did not enter the alphabet until the medieval period. The alphabet used by the Romans is the direct progenitor of the alphabet used for English, though elements of an Anglo-Saxon script were in use up through the 15th century when, largely due to the standardization effected

	ROLLS FROM HERCULANEUM.	CAPITALS FROM CODICES.	ANCIENT CURSIVES.	UNCIALS.
a				
b				
c				
d				
e				
f				
g				
h				
i				
k				
l				
m				
n				
o				
p				
q				
r				
s				
t				
u				
x				
y				
z				

Chart showing majuscule and cursive forms of Roman alphabet in use in early Christian era (Harold Johnston, *Latin Manuscripts*, Chicago, 1897)

AGRICOLAEHIBERNOLAETISSIMAPVLVERE...
LATIVSAGERNVLLOTANTVMSEMOESIACVLTV
IACTATEIPSASVASMIRANTVRGARGARAMESSES
QVIDDICAMTACIOQVISEMINECOMMINVSARVA
INSEQVITVRCVMVEOQ·RVITMALEPINGVISHAR...
DEINDESATISFLVVIVMINDVCITRIVOSQ·SEQV...
ETCVMEXVSTVSAGERMORIENTIB·AESIVATHERB...
ECCESVPERCILIOCLIVOSITRAMITISVNDAM
ELICITHINCADENSRAVCVMPERLEVEAMVRMV·
SAXACIELISCATEBRISQ·ARENTIATEMPERATARVA
QVIDQVINTGRAVIDISPROCVMBATCVLMVSAR...
LVXVRIEMSEGETVMTENERADEPASCITINHERBA
CVMPRIMVMSVLCOSAEQVANTSATAQVIOLPA...
COLLECTVMVMOREMBIBVIADIDVCITHARENA
PRAESERTIMINCERTISSIMENSIBAMNISABVND...
EXITETOBDVCTOLATETENETOMNIATIMO
VNDICAVALLEPIDOSVDANTVMORELACVNAE
NECIAMTENHAECCVMSINTHOMINVMQ·BOVM...
VERSANDOTERRAMEXPERTNIHILIMPROBANS...
STRYMONIAEQ·GRVESETAMARISINTIBALIBRIS

Anglo-Saxon, early 11th century, probably from Luxeuil. Note hybrid combination of squarish majuscules, uncial, and miniscule. (Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ms. Auct. F1.15f.5)

Early 12th century, note the way the body of the bird makes the bowl of the 'P' in a substitution, rather than merely wrapping around it as decoration (Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, MD, Ms. 10.18, folio 175)
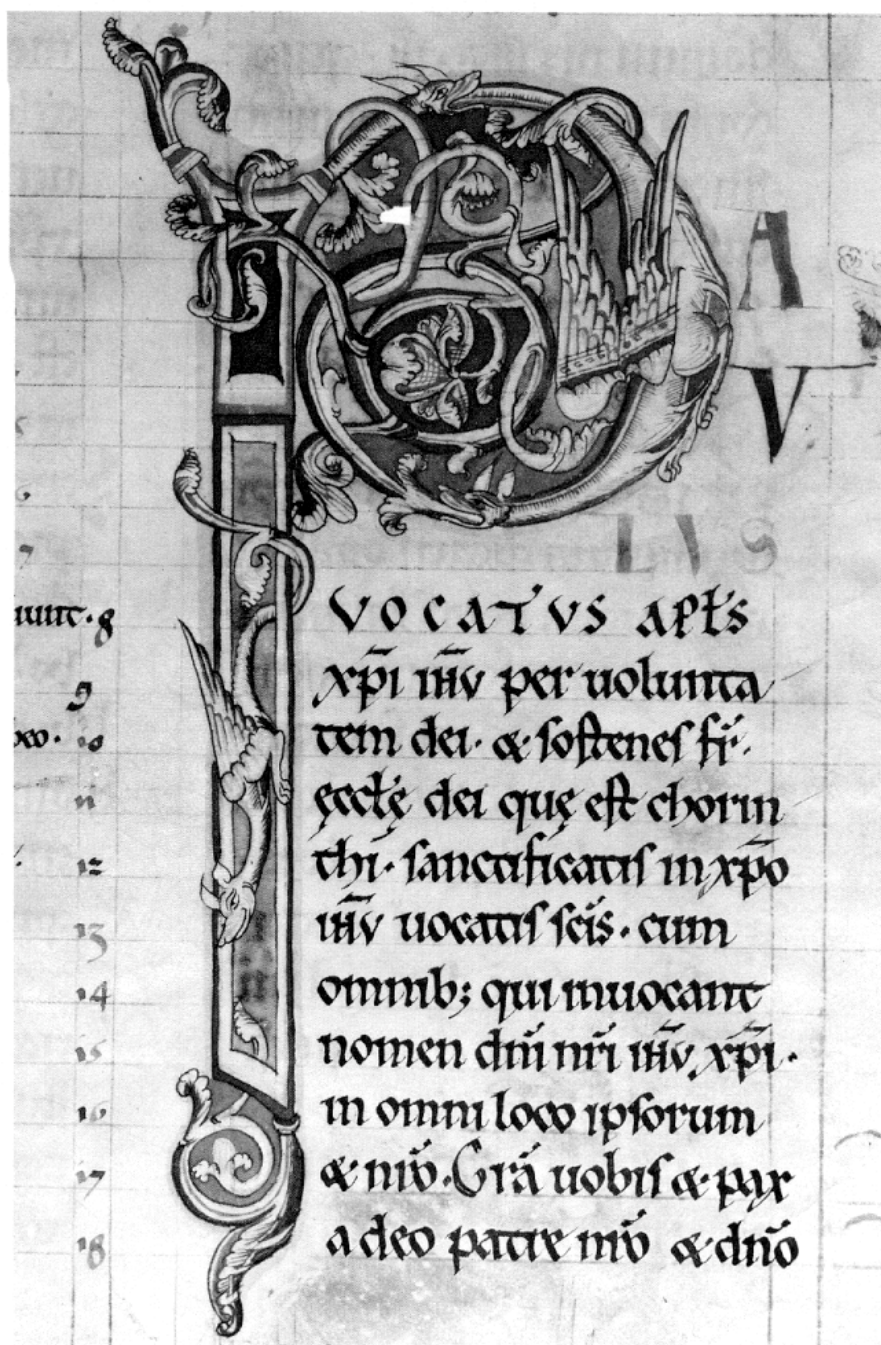
Quod tū audiſſet dauid:deſcendit in

Johann Gutenberg, a line from
the 42-line bible, Mainz, 1454

Leonardo da Vinci and Fra Luca de Pacioli's constructed alphabet, about 1500 (*Les Plus Beaux Types des Lettres*, Paris)

Palatino's constructed alphabet, *Libro Nuovo*, 1540 (*Les Plus Beaux Types des Lettres*, Paris)

Albrecht Dürer's construction of majuscules 1525, Nuremberg
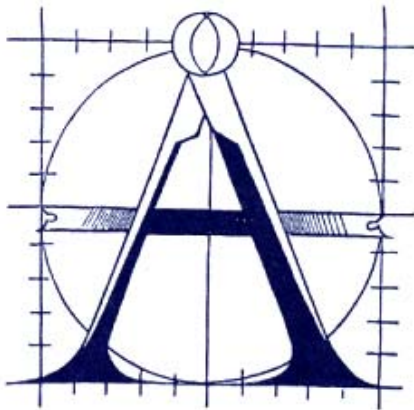
Geoffrey Tory's constructed 'A' with compass image, *Champfleury*, 1529
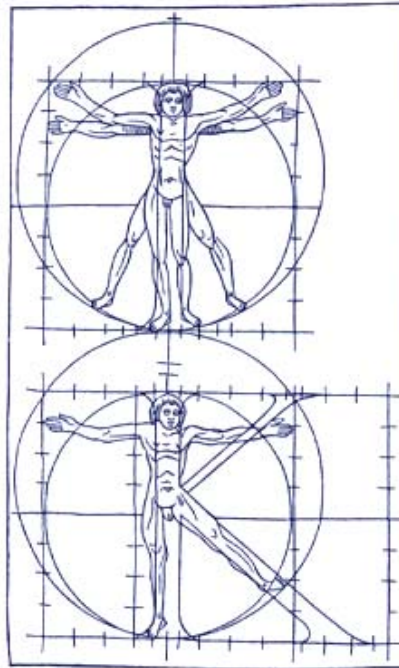
Geoffrey Tory's constructed 'T' and 'K' based on human proportions; *Champfleury*, 1529
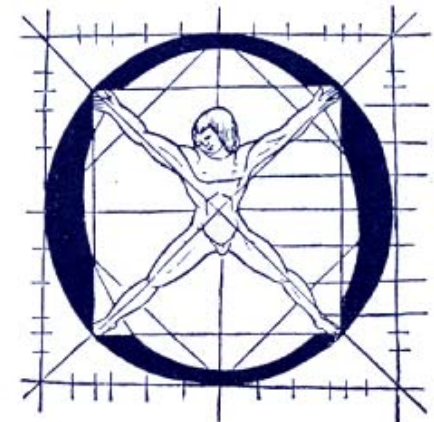
Geoffrey Tory's constructed 'O' based on human proportions; *Champfleury*, 1529

Theodor de Bry, 1595, Woodcut
Initials with Adam and Eve motif
in the 'A' and Tetragrammaton
in the 'B'

Flourish capitals typical of late
Renaissance German penman-
ship

Christopher Weyle, German,
early 18th century virtuoso pen-
manship (redrawn by Shaw)

A   S P E C I M E N

By J O H N   B A S K E R V I L L E

Of B I R M I N G H A M LETTER-FOUNDER *and* P R I N T E R.

A
B
C
D
E
F

Double Pica Roman.

TANDEM aliquando, Quirites! L. Catilinam furentem audacia, fcelus anhelantem, peftem patriæ nefarie molientem, vobis atque huic urbi ferrum flammamque minitantem, ex urbe
A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P.

Great Primer Roman.

TANDEM aliquando, Quirites! L. Catilinam furentem audacia, fcelus anhelantem peftem patriæ nefariè molientem, vobis atque huic urbi ferrum flammamque minitantem, ex urbe vel ejecimus, vel e-mifimus, vel ipfum egredientem verbis profecuti fumus. abiit, exceffit, evafit, erupit. nulla jam pernicies à
A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V.

Double Pica Italic.

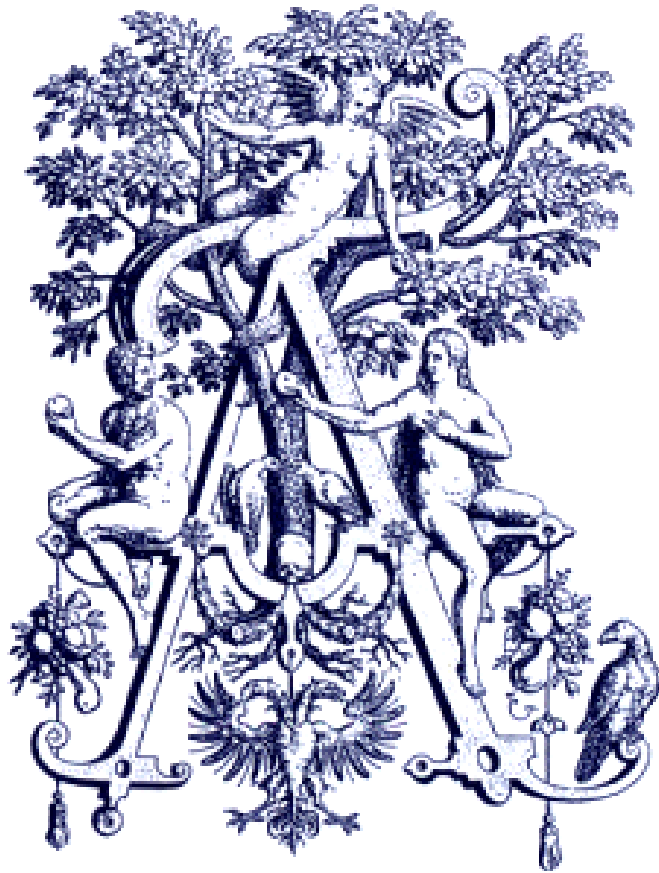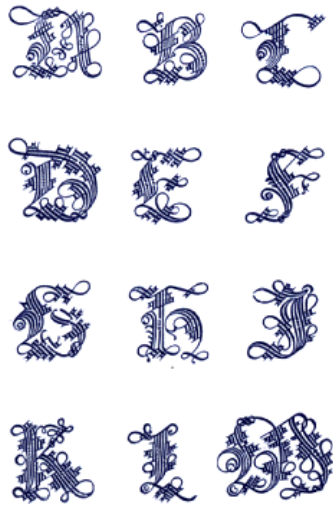*TANDEM aliquando, Quirites! L. Catiliuam furentem audacia, fcelus anhelantem, peftem patriae nefarie molientem, vobis atque huic urbi ferrum flammamque minitantem, ex urbe vel ejecimus, vel emifimus, vel ipfum egredientem*
A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P.

Great Primer Italic.

TANDEM aliquando, Quirites! L. Catilinam furentem audacia, fcelus anhelantem, peftem patriae nefarie molientem, vobis atque huic urbi ferrum flammamque minitantem, ex urbe vel ejecimus, vel emifimus, vel ipfum egredientem verbis profecuti fumus. abiit, exceffit, evafit, erupit. nulla jam pernicies à monftro illo,
A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W.

A
B
C
D
E
F

John Baskerville's printing types,

1789 sample sheet, Paris

ODE I.

AD VENEREM.

Intermissa, Venus, diu
Rursus bella moves. Parce, precor, precor!
Non sum qualis eram bonæ
Sub regno Cinaræ. Desine, dulcium
Mater sæva Cupidinum,
Circa lustra decem flectere mollibus
Iam durum imperiis. Abi

Closeup of Bodoni's modern type in the 18th century edition of Horace, Parma

KURT SCHWITTERS

KURT SCHWJTTERS

KURT SCHWITTERS

KURT SCHWJTTERS

abcdefghi
jklmnopqr
stuvwxyz

d

HERBERT BAYER: Abb. 1. Alfabet
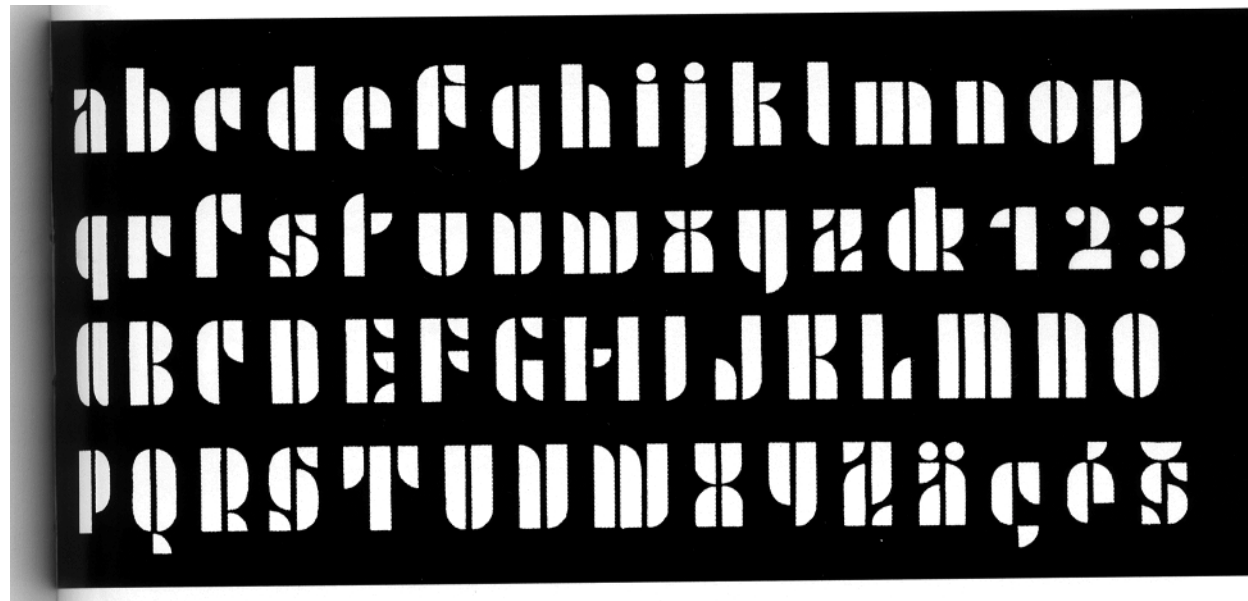„g" und „k" sind noch als
unfertig zu betrachten

Beispiel eines Zeichens
in größerem Maßstab
Präzise optische Wirkung

sturm blond

Abb. 2. Anwendung

399

Tall and deep letters:

Shavian letter	)	1	(	ò	J	S	(	(	\	Q
Pronunciation (may vary, see below)	/p/	/t/	/k/	/T/	/f/	/s/	/S/	/tS/	/j/	/N/
Name/example	peep	tot	kick	thigh	fee	so	sure	church	yea	hung

	ι	ι	?	Q	ſ	2	7	3	/	8
	/b/	/d/	/g/	/D/	/v/	/z/	/Z/	/dZ/	/w/	/h/
	bib	dead	gag	they	vow	zoo	measure	judge	woe	ha-ha

Short letters:

	c	ɔ	ſ	\	ι	ɥ	ι	ɛ	ɟ	ɔ
	/l/	/r/	/m/	/n/	/l/	/i:/	/e/	/el/	/{/	/al/
	loll	roar	mime	nun	if	eat	egg	age	ash	ice

	ſ	7	)	o	v	ʌ	<	>	ʃ	ʒ
	/@/	/V/	/A./	/@U/	/U/	/u:/	/aU/	/OI/	/A:/	/O:/
	ado	up	on	oak	wool	ooze	out	oil	ah	awe

Ligatures:

	�か	ゐ	ゐ	ゐ	ゐ	ゐ	r	ท
	/A:r/	/O:r/	/e@r/	/E:r/	/@r/	/I@r/	/l@/	/ju:/
	are	or	air	err	array	ear	lan	yew

ᘜᒥᑐᒪᕪᐱ ᐂ Ϙ ᐦᑐᕪ

ᒍᒣᐤᒥᕪᔕ. ᐂ ᐤᔭᕪᐊ ᒣᔭᐂ Ϙᐤᐂ Ϙᕪ ᕮᐤᒥ ᐂᐤ ᔕᐤᕮᐦ.
ᘜᒥᑐᒪᕪᐱᕪ [ᔕᕮᕪᔕᕮᐤ ᐂᐤᕪᕮᔕᕮᐦᕪ] ᐤ, ᒪᐦᕮᒥ ᐦᕪ,
Ϙᕪ ᐂᒥᒥ. ᕪᔕᔕᐦ Ϙ ᔕᕮᕪ ᐦᕪ ᐂ ᐂ ᐦᕪ. ᐂ ᐤᒣᐤᐤ
ᒪᐤᔭᐦ ᐌᕮᐠᐦ ᐂ ᐦᒣᒣ ᐦᒥᕪᔕᒣᐦ ᐃ ᑐᐤ ᐃ ᒥᒣᒣ ᒪᐦ
ᐂ ᐤᐌᐦ ᐦᐤ ᒣᐤ ᐃ ᒪᐦ ᐂᐤ ᘜᒣᒣᐦᒥ ᐦᐤ.
ᐌᕮᐠᐦ ᒣ ᐂᐦ Ϙᕪ ᔕᕮᒣᐤ ᐦᕪᐂ.

ᒍᒣᐤᒥᕪᔕ. Ϙᐂᐦᕪᔕ ᐦᐊ. ᒣᔕ: Ϙᐂᐦ ᐦᕪ ᐂᐤᔕᐦ. Ϙᕪ
ᒣᐠ ᐂᒥᒣ Ϙᐤ ᐠᐤ ᐦ ᒣᒣᐦ.

ᔕᒥᐤᐱᐤ [ᐱᐦ ᐂᒥᒣ ᒣᐦᐠᐦ ᐠᕪᕪᔕᕮᐠ ᐂᒣ ᐂ ᒣᕪ ᔕᕮᐠᐠᒣ
ᐂᐤᔕᐂ ᐂ ᒍᒣᐤᒥᕪᔕ ᒣ ᐠᒥᐂ ᐠᐤᐦᐂ, ᔕᒣᐤᒣ ᒣᐠᐂᔕᒣᐠᐦᕪ].

ᒍᒣᐤᒥᕪᔕ [ᒣᐤᒣᕪ ᒣ ᐠᒥᐂ ᒍᐤᔕᐤᕪ] ᐦᕪᐂᔕ Ϙᐂ
ᐦ ᔕᐤ?

ᔕᒥᐤᐱᐤ [ᐌᐠᕪᕪᐂ] ᐂᐦᐂᔕ.

ᒍᒣᐤᒥᕪᔕ [ᐌᐠᐤᐠᐂ ᐠᐠᕪ ᒣᔕᔕᕮ] ᐂᐦ ᐦᒣᒣᔕᐤ ᐂᐤ ᐂ
ᐠᒥᐂᐦ ᐤ ᒣᒣᒣᕪ?