

Bede's Latin Hand Alphabet

Explanation and Hands Courtesy of Ásfríðr Ulfvíðardóttir.

This manual alphabet comes from the first chapter of *De Temporum Ratione* (The Reckoning of Time). Entitled *De Computo vel Loquela Digitorum* (Calculating and Speaking with the Fingers), Bede thought it was important that if you were going to calculate when Easter was going to occur in any given year¹, it would be common sense to ensure one was numerate first. So he explained “that very useful and easy skill of flexing the fingers,” (Wallis, 1999; 11) dating from at least Roman times, that is often known today as finger calculus (Richter-Shermann, 2000; 28 and Bragg, 1997; 15).

What Bede suggested one could do with this technique was something new -- writing that “one can represent a sort of manual language, whether for the sake of exercising one's wits, or as a game. By this means one can, by forming one letter at a time, transmit the words contained by those letters to another person who knows this procedure, so that he can read and understand them at a distance” (Wallis, 1999; 11). In short, Bede had invented the first recorded manual alphabet (Bragg, 1997; 16). In fact, he suggested two varieties of alphabet systems, the first substituting the Roman letters A to Z with numbers 1 to 23 (remember there is no j, u or w!) to form a one-handed alphabet and the second relying on Greek numerals that uses two hands. It is the former 'Latin' alphabet that is illustrated below.

To 'read' the numbers or letters, the left hand can be divided into two parts – thumb and forefinger represent the 10s, and the remaining fingers numbers 1-9. Bede described the handshapes involved thusly:

Cum ergo dicis **Unum**, minimum in laeva digitorum inflectens, in medium palmae artum infiges.

C. d. **Duo**, secundum a minimo flexum, ibidem impones.

C. d. **Tria**, tertium similiter adflexes.

C. d. **Quatuor**, itidem minimum levabis.

C. d. **Quinque**, secundum a minimo similiter eriges.

C. d. **Sex**, tertium nihilominus elevabis, medio duntaxat solo, qui Medicus appellatur, in medium palmae fixo.

C. d. **Septem**, minimum solum, caeteris interim levatis, super palmae radicem pones. Juxta quem c. d. **Octo**, medicum.

C. d. **Novem**, impudicum e regione compones.

C. d. **Decem**, unguem indicis in medio figes artu pollicis.

C. d. **Viginti**, summitatem pollicis inter medios indicis et impudici artus immittes. (Bede, 1843)

Note: Cum dicis is abbreviated to c. d.

If you wish to say **one**, bend the little finger, so that it touches the edge of your palm (i.e. bend at the knuckle).

For **two**, bend the ring finger next to it.

For **three**, bend the middle finger too.

For **four**, raise the little finger.

For **five**, raise also the ring finger.

For **six**, raise all fingers except for the ring finger, which alone remains touching the palm.

For **seven**, raise all fingers except for the little one, which is bent across the palm (i.e. from the bottom joint of the finger).













For **eight**, bend the ring finger next to it.

For **nine**, bend the middle finger too.

For **ten**, place the nail of the index finger against the middle joint of the thumb.

For **twenty**, place the thumb between the index and middle fingers. (Sanford, 1928; 590 and Menniger, 1992; 203-4)

¹ Easter is the first Sunday after the first full moon of spring, which begins on March 21st. Easter Sunday then determines when Whitsuntide, the day of the Ascension of Christ, the feast of Corpus Christi and the feast of the Trinity are held (Menniger, 1992; 202). <http://www.medieval-baltic.us/latinbede.pdf>

		
1 A	9 I	17 R
		
2 B	10 K	18 S
		
3 C	11 L	19 T
		
4 D	12 M	20 V



5 E



13 N



21 X



6 F



14 O



22 Y



7 G



15 P



23 Z



8 H



16 Q

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