

## READING BEFORE PUNCTUATION

Early texts had no punctuation symbols at all. Knowing exactly how to read the words, where to put the intonations, pauses, etc., was an art, and one that required practice, and usually reading (or at least mumbling) out-loud while reading.

The first formal system of punctuation was developed by the Greek scholar Aristophanes of Byzantium, librarian at Alexandria in the second century BCE, who used a set of three points of varying heights: **media distinctio** placed mid-level, serving the function of a comma (a short pause); **subdistinctio** level with the text, serving the function of a colon or semicolon (a longer pause); and **distinctio** placed near the top of a line of text, to mark a very long pause (though not necessarily the end of a sentence).

Aristophanes' system, however, was never widely used, and by the first century BCE, the only punctuation in common use were occasional **interpuncts**, which the Romans used to indicate word divisions in formal inscriptions, such as those found on buildings and monuments. The *interpunct* was a small middle dot vertically centered between words, e.g. DONA·NOBIS·REQVIEM. Perhaps in emulation of Ancient Greek, which never developed interpuncts, writing eventually returned to **scriptio continua**, with no spaces, breaks, or other marks between words. Some punctuation did continue to be used in the Roman world by **grammatici**, or schoolmasters, to help their students read accurately, although most adult texts shunned them.

The use of **spaces** for interword separation didn't appear until much later, roughly 600-800 CE. By the seventh century, the convention was quite common. In some early medieval manuscripts, two vertically aligned dots represented a full stop at the end of a sentence. Eventually one of the dots was dropped, and the remaining dot served as a **period**, **colon** or **comma**, depending on whether it was aligned with the top, middle, or base of the lowercase letters.<sup>1</sup>

By the ninth century, a consistent writing style had been established for all scribes in the Holy Roman Empire, including the use of capitals to begin sentences, the use of spaces between words, the arranging of text into sentences and paragraphs, standardized punctuation, and the development of *Caroline minuscules* – the forerunners of our own lowercase letters.

## THE PROLOGUE TO VERGIL'S AENEID

ARM AVIRUMQUE CANOTROIAEQUIPRIMUSABORISITALIAMFATOPROFUGUSLAVINIAQUEVENITLITOR  
AMULTUMILLEETERRISIACTATUSETALTOVISUPERUMSAEVAEMEMOREMIUNONISOBIRAMMULTAQU  
OQUEETBELLOPASSUSDUMCONDERETURBEMINFERRRETQUEDEOSLATIOGENUSUNDELATINUMALBANI  
QUEPATRESATQUEALTAEMOENIAROMAEUSAMIHICAUSMEMORAUONUMINELAESOQUIDVEDOLE  
NSREGINADEUMTOTVOLVERECASUSINSIGNEMPIETATEVIRUMTOTADIRELABORESIMPULERRITTANTAEN  
EANIMISCAELESTIBUSIRAEURBSANTIQUAFUITTYRITENUERECOLONIKARTHAGOITALIAMCONTRATIB  
ERINAQUELONGEOSTIADIVESOPUMSTUDIISQUEASPERRIMABELLIQUAMIUNOFERTURTERRISMAGISOM  
NIBUSUNAMPOSTHABITACOLUISSESAMOHICILLIUSARMAHICCURRUSFUITHOCREGNUMDEAGENTIBUS  
ESSESIQUAFATASINANTIAMTUMTENDITQUEFOVETQUEPROGENIEMSEDENIMTROIANOASANGUINEDUC  
IAUDIERATTYRIASOLIMQUAEVERTERETARCESHINCPOPULUMLATEREGEMBELLOQUESUPERBUMVENT  
URUMEXCIDIO LIBYAESICVOLVEREPARCASIDMETUENS VETERISQUE MEMORSATURNIABELLIPRIMAQU  
ODADTROIAMPROCARISSGESSERATARGISNECDUMETIAMCAUSAEIRARUMSAEVIQUEDOLORESEXCIDER  
ANTANIMOMANETALTAMENTEREPOSTUMIUDICIUMPARIDISSPRETAETQUEINIURIAFORMAEETGENUSI  
NVISUMETRAPTIGANYMEDISHONORESHISACCENSASUPERIACATOSAEQUORETOTOTROASRELIQUIASD  
ANAUMATQUEIMMITISACHILLIARCEBATLONGELATIOMULTOSQUEPERANNOSERRABANTACTIFATIS  
MARIAOMNIAIRCUMTANTAEMOLISERATROMANAMCONDEREGENTEM

<sup>1</sup> The **hyphen** (-) was introduced around the eleventh century, to indicate that a word was continued on the next line, but these word breaks were not at natural syllables as they are today. Aldus Manutius (1449-1515), the Renaissance typographer and printer, later helped establish Alcuin's reforms through consistent usage. Manutius used a **period** (.) to indicate a full stop at the end of a sentence and a diagonal slash (/) to represent a pause. The **question mark** (?) was developed much later, in sixteenth-century England. Most typographic historians contend that the design for the question mark was derived from an abbreviation of the Latin word *quaestio*, which simply means 'what'. At first this symbol consisted of a capital 'Q' atop a lowercase 'o'; this handout compiled in part from: <http://www.completetranslation.com/punctuation.htm>