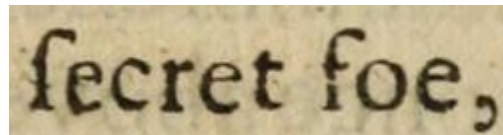# The Long "S" and the Assyrians

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July 12, 2025
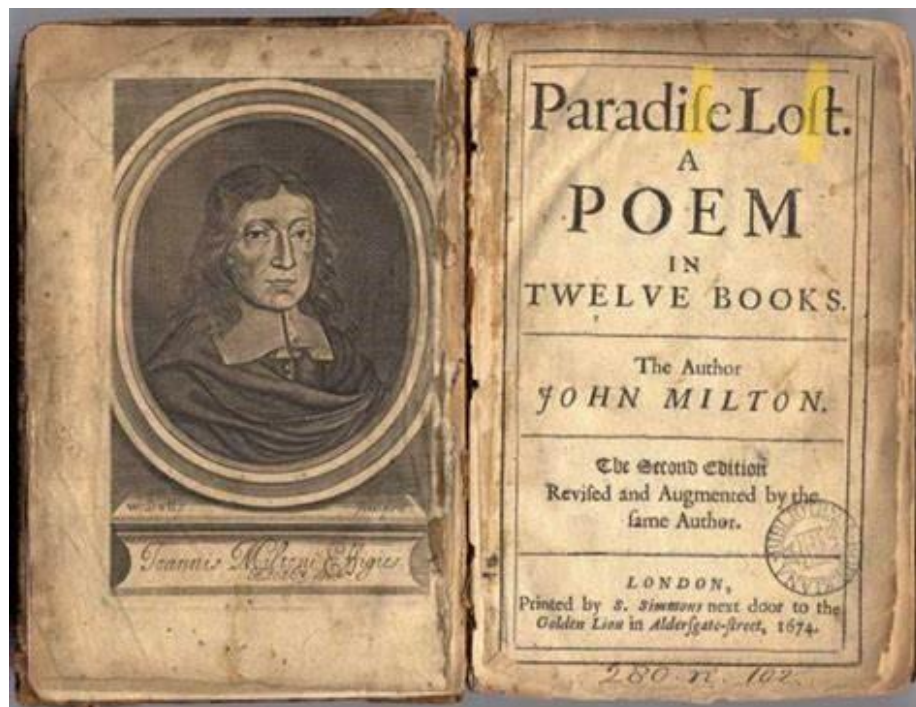
The long s, ⟨ſ⟩[1], also known as the medial *s*, initial *s*, or descending s, is an archaic form of the lowercase letter ⟨s⟩, found in works since the late 8th century and very common in the 17th century or early modern publications.

The long (s) dates back to the old Roman cursive handwriting[2], and survived as an artifact in the earliest printed book fonts.

For example, the two words "ſecret foe" (secret foe) extracted from the 1667 printing of the epic poem *Paradise Lost* (Book IV page 1), showing long *s* (ſ).
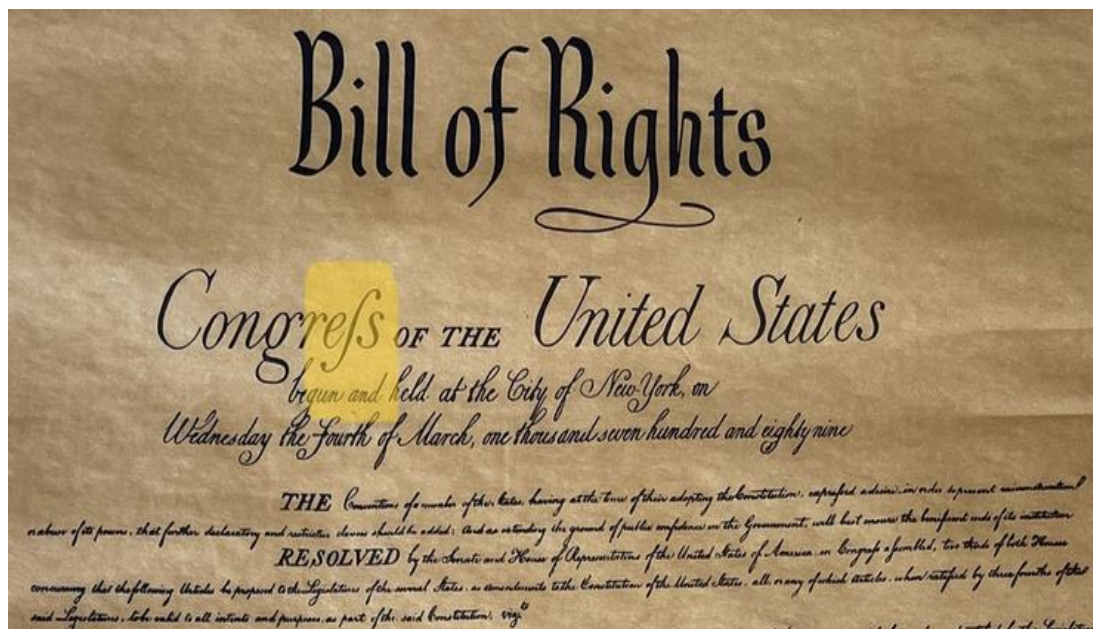

The two Ss in the title of the epic poem by John Milton is another example.

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[1] The long "*s*" had a variant appearance depending on typeface: ſ, ſ, ʃ, ʃ.
[2] Benjamin Breen. "Why Does S Look Like F? A Guide to Reading Very Old Books". The Appendix. 7/31/2013. Accessed 7/8/2025. https://theappendix.net/posts/2013/07/why-does-s-look-like-f-a-guide-to-reading-very-old-books

The long s appeared in the first line of the US Bill of Rights that were ratified December 15, 1791.

It is important to understand that the long (s), or ⟨ſ⟩, was used only in the middle of words, never at the beginning or the end. It replaced one or both of the letters "*s*" in a double-*s* sequence (e.g., "poſſeſs" or "poſseſs" for "possess").[3]

The long "*s*" disappeared from new typefaces in late 18th century[4], and most printers discarded older typefaces by early 19th century.
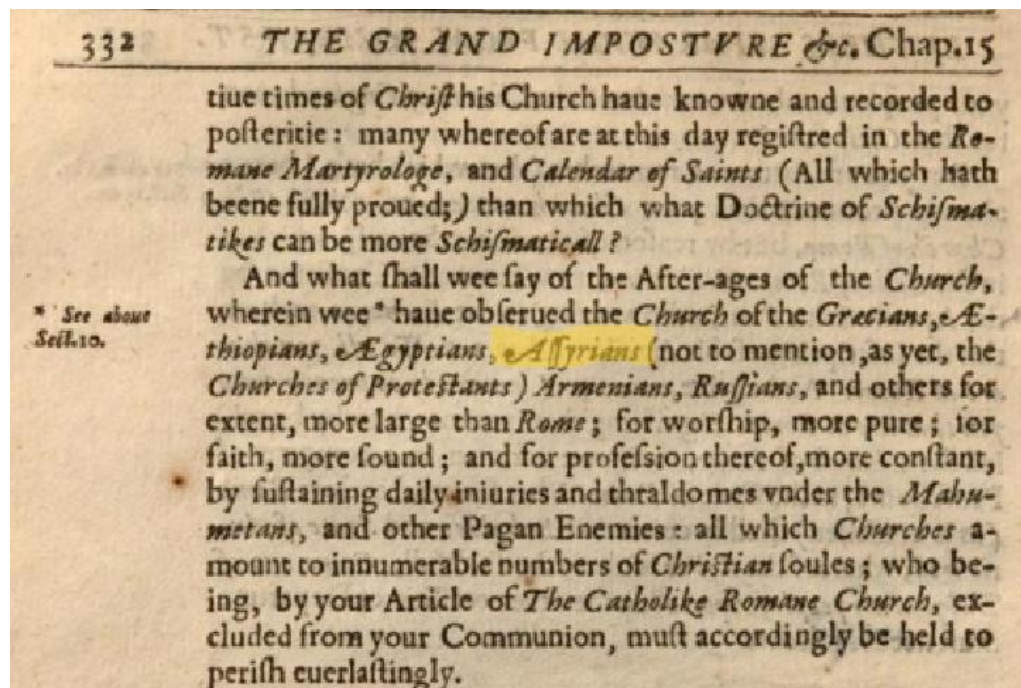
Now to our main point.

The long "s" or ⟨ſ⟩ caused some confusion in historical texts, because it affected search accuracy. Individuals searching for words containing the letter "s", such as Assyrian/Assyrians, easily missed relevant results, because search algorithms in most cases didn't recognize the long "s" or ⟨ſ⟩ as equivalent to "s". The word "Assyrian" appeared as "Aſſyrian" or "Aſsyrian" and did not appear in many common search attempts.

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[3] Accessed 7/9/2025 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Long_s

[4] "The Long and Short of the Letter S in Olde English Printing and Script". 4/23/2018. Accessed 7/10/2025 https://archivalarchaeology.blogspot.com/2018/04/the-long-and-short-of-letter-s-in-olde.html

In 1626, a book titled "The Grand Imposture of The (now) Church of Rome" was published in London by Thomas Morton (1564-1659) (successively Bishop of Chester, of Lichfield and Coventry, and of Durham).

For a long time, it was not possible for me personally, for example, to detect the "*Aſſyrians*" (Assyrians) in the above paragraph (or "*Aſsyrians*" in others) while doing my research on Assyrians in history. We read, "Humanities scholars increasingly rely on digital archives for their research instead of time-consuming visits to physical archives. This shift in research method has the hidden cost of working with digitally processed historical documents: how much trust can a scholar place in noisy representations of source texts?" The authors wondered regarding the impact of this practice. They concluded, "Especially for old documents, the results of OCR processing are far from perfect. While improvements in pre-/post-processing and in the OCR technology itself lead to lower error rates, the results are still not error-free."[5]

This was perhaps one of the reasons that led some historians to claim that the English form "Assyrian" were lacking in English history sources of the early Middle Ages and the following periods. Of course, that was not the case in Greek references using Greek script as Assyrians appeared in the forms of Assúrios or Súrios.[6]

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[5] Myriam C. Traub, Jacco van Ossenbruggen, and Lynda Hardman. Impact Analysis of OCR Quality on Research Tasks in Digital Archives. Conference Paper in Lecture Notes in Computer Science · September 2015. Accessed 7/11/2025 file:///C:/Users/Fred/Downloads/23429B.pdf
[6] Simo Parpola. "National and Ethnic Identity in the Neo-Assyrian Empire and Assyrian Identity in Post-Empire Times". Accessed 7/9/2025 https://archive.org/details/parpolaidentityarticlefinal