The Long "S" and the Assyrians

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The long s, $\langle f \rangle^1$, also known as the medial *s*, initial *s*, or descending s, is an archaic form of the lowercase letter $\langle s \rangle$, 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 handwriting², and survived as an artifact in the earliest printed book fonts.

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



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



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. <u>https://theappendix.net/posts/2013/07/why-does-s-look-like-f-a-guide-to-reading-very-old-books</u>

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

Bill of Rights Congress of THE United States begun and held at the City of New York, on Wednesday the fourth of March, one thousand seven hundred and eightynine

It is important to understand that the long (s), or $\langle f \rangle$, 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., "poffefs" or "pofsefs" for "possess").³

The long "*s*" disappeared from new typefaces in late 18th century⁴, and most printers discarded older typefaces by early 19th century.

Now to our main point.

The long "s" or $\langle f \rangle$ 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 $\langle f \rangle$ as equivalent to "s". The word "Assyrian" appeared as "Alfyrian" or "Alsyrian" and did not appear in many common search attempts.

³ Accessed 7/9/2025 <u>https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Long_s</u>

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

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).

| _332 | THE GRAND IMPOSTVRE &c. Chap.15 |
|---------------------------|--|
| * See about Seella 10. | tiue times of Christian Schurch haue knowne and recorded to posteritie : many whereof are at this day registred in the Re- mane Martyrologe, and Calendar of Saints (All which hath beene fully proued;) than which what Doctrine of Schifma- tikes can be more Schifmaticall? And what shall wee fay of the After-ages of the Church, wherein wee * haue observed the Church of the Greeians, Af- thiopians, Agyptians, Affricants (not to mention, as yet, the Churches of Protestants) Armenians, Russians, and others for extent, more large than Rome; for worthip, more pure; for faith, more found; and for profession thereof, more constant, by fultaining daily iniuries and thraldomes vader the Mahn- metans, and other Pagan Enemies : all which Churches a- mount to innumerable numbers of Christian foules; who be- ing, by your Article of The Catholike Romane Church, ex- cluded from your Communion, must accordingly be held to perish cuerlastingly. |

For a long time, it was not possible for me personally, for example, to detect the "*Affyrians*" (Assyrians) in the above paragraph (or "*Afsyrians*" 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

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 <u>file:///C:/Users/Fred/Downloads/23429B.pdf</u>

⁶ Simo Parpola. "National and Ethnic Identity in the Neo-Assyrian Empire and Assyrian Identity in Post-Empire Times". Accessed 7/9/2025 <u>https://archive.org/details/parpolaidentityarticlefinal</u>