

Design of the Greek Archaic Letter San For Use in Computer Fonts

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The archaic letters San and san have been accepted by the Unicode Technical Committee and will soon be voted on by representatives of ISO-10646. We therefore need to create good designs for them¹. The problem with archaic Greek letters in general is that because they are not used with the same frequency as the other letters, they have not gone through the same amount of design over the years and therefore have not evolved shapes that are as refined as those of the other letters, and this is particularly true of San/san. This paper reflects the thinking I have done so far; I would like to hear suggestions from any interested scholars or type designers before proceeding further. Anyone who wishes to comment on the ideas expressed in this paper should contact me at perryd@telocity.com.

Thanks to Dr. Maria Pantelia and the staff of the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae for providing some of the samples used below. Note that if a letter name is capitalized, it refers to the uppercase letter; thus *Mu* = M while *mu* = μ.

I. Capital San

According to Jeffrey, San was originally an M-shaped glyph with straight legs that later evolved into a cursive version with somewhat shorter splayed legs (see figure 1). The same shape as in Jeffrey's first example is clearly visible on a ceramic perfume pot shown in Cook, p. 58.

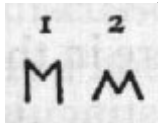


Figure 1. Historical shapes of San (from Jeffrey, p. 33)

So there is no question about the shape of the ancient character. A more difficult question is how to integrate it into a standard Greek typeface. It must be readily distinguishable from Mu while still reflecting the historical shape of the letter. (Throughout the discussion, unless specified otherwise, I am considering general-purpose Greek typefaces; a face specifically designed for epigraphical use would have Mu with a short right leg, which distinguishes it from San.)

The best design seems to me a glyph similar to Mu but with the center v-shaped section not coming down as far. This design can be implemented in either a serif or a sans-serif typeface; in the latter instance, it would reflect very closely the shape of the ancient letter. An examination

¹ The proposal for San/san prepared by the TLG may be seen at http://www.tlg.uci.edu/Uni_prop.html. The list of proposed characters at <http://www.unicode.org/unicode/alloc/Pipeline.html> notes their acceptance by the Unicode Technical Committee on November 7, 2002 with the codepoints U+03FA and U+03FB.

of several typefaces that contain the Greek alphabet shows that Mu, like its Roman counterpart, has a central point that descends either all the way to the baseline or quite close to it. Therefore the design proposed here for San should not be difficult to differentiate from M. It can also work well with a variety of existing designs; the legs may be straight or slightly splayed, as happens with M and Mu, at the designer's discretion.



Figure 2. Mu from various typefaces, followed by an initial design for San

II. Lowercase San

This is a more difficult situation, given the lack of models in existing typefaces. The following designs are possibilities. The legs may be straight or splayed, following the designer's preference. In my final version (given at the left) the v-shaped central portion is set above the baseline, to reflect the historical design of this character, but it could also be placed lower. The left leg can be straight or angled at the designer's preference.



Figure 3. Possible designs for san (the kappa is there to mark the baseline).

This design has the following advantages:

- it clearly connects with the historical shape of uppercase San
- the extended left leg reflects the evolution of the Mu-shape in Greek script; it also makes it easy for the font designer to connect san typographically with the archaic letters digamma and koppa, both of which have descenders, as well as with rho and mu
- it will not readily be confused with mu or any other Greek letter
- it is flexible enough to fit into a variety of font styles

We recognize that different font designs will require somewhat different shapes. For example, a sloped font such as Porson (used in the Oxford Classical Texts) might look best with a sloped left leg on san, while an orthotic font would need a straight leg. These variations are left to the font designer. It is hoped that this paper will provide a starting point toward establishing a common, agreed-upon shape for this character.

Lowercase san will be used to transcribe inscriptions into a form that makes them readable for those accustomed to standard Greek texts. Here is an example from Cook (p. 58) that will provide a sense of how the proposed design for san will work in context. Cook's transcription looks like the one that follows except that he used sigma in place of san, presumably because he had no san character available. (This is a list of men's names.)

Μενέαμ Θέρον Μυρμίδαμ Εΰδιφομ Λυσανδρίδαμ
Χαρικλίδαμ Δεχίλομ Ξένφομ Φρύξ

Figure 4. Part of an inscription on a perfume-jar from Corinth. The strokes on san may appear a little too light on screen.

References

Cook, B. F. *Greek Inscriptions*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.
Jeffrey. *The Origin and Transmission of the Greek Alphabet*.