

# APPROACHING ANCIENT TEXTS IN GERMANY CA. 1800: F.A. WOLF AND A.W. SCHLEGEL ON STUDYING GREEK, LATIN, AND SANSKRIT

## Friedrich August Wolf

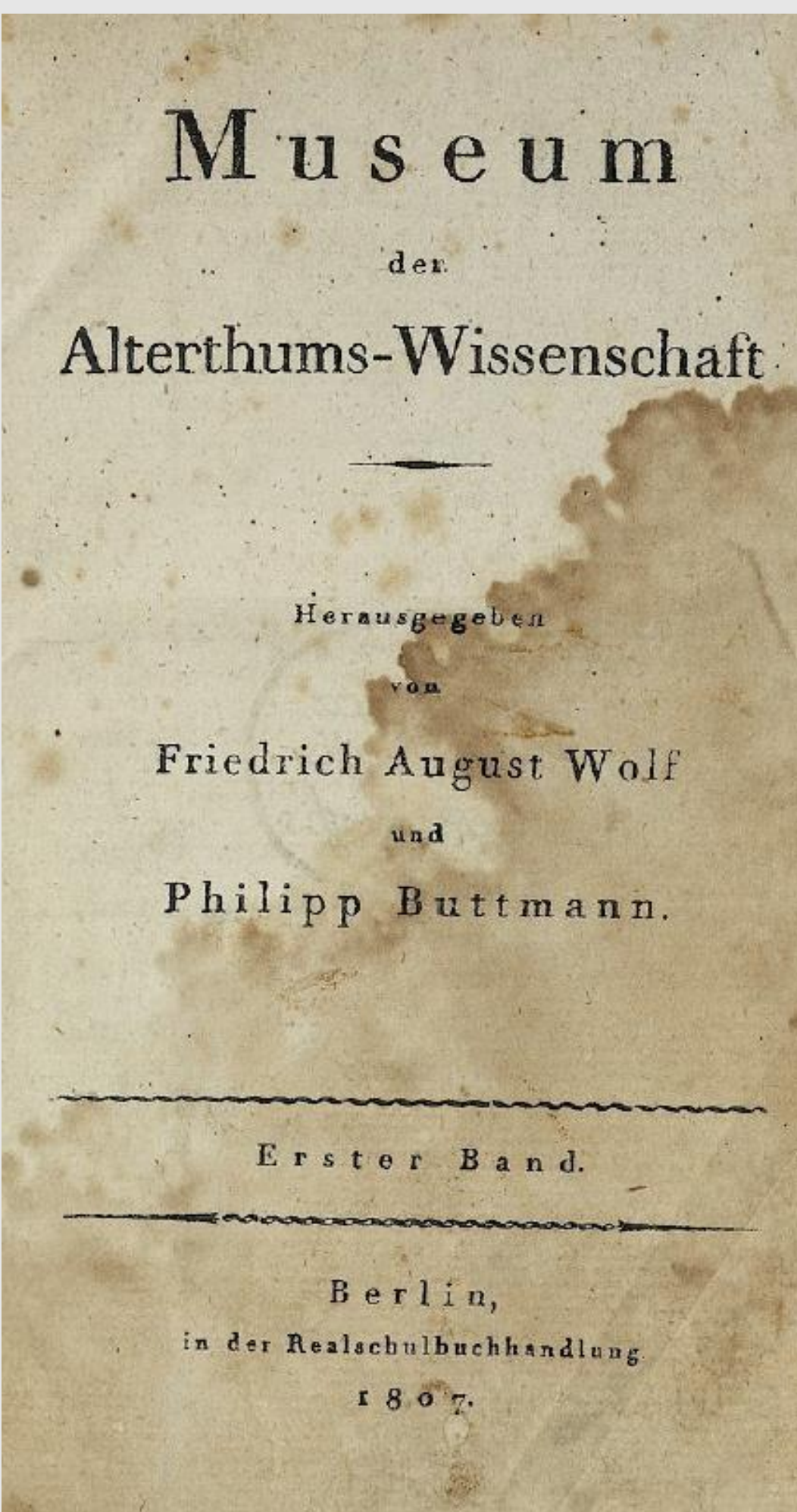
Friedrich August Wolf (1759–1824) is a founding figure of modern Classical philology – the study of Greek and Latin texts and culture. Wolf studied in Göttingen, where in 1777, he reportedly insisted to matriculate as a student of philology, rather than of theology as common. From 1783 onwards, Wolf held a professorship at the University of Halle, where in 1787 he founded a philological seminar. In 1806, Napoleonic forces closed his university, Wolf moved to Berlin, where he spent the rest of his life, and where he was loosely involved with the Prussian Academy of Sciences and with the University founded in 1810.



## August Wilhelm von Schlegel

### The Ideal Devanāgarī Typeface

In 1820, A. W. Schlegel (1767-1845), a German philologist expert in Sanskrit, was entrusted by the Prussian government to set up an Indian printing press and create a new Devanāgarī typefont to print Sanskrit texts. He aimed to create a character that could be elegant for a European taste, and easy to use to minimise the number of characters, labour, and consequently typographical errors. To do so, he did not rely on previous typefonts created in India and in Europe: he went to the source, the beautiful manuscripts preserved at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Bibliothèque du Roi at that time) in Paris.



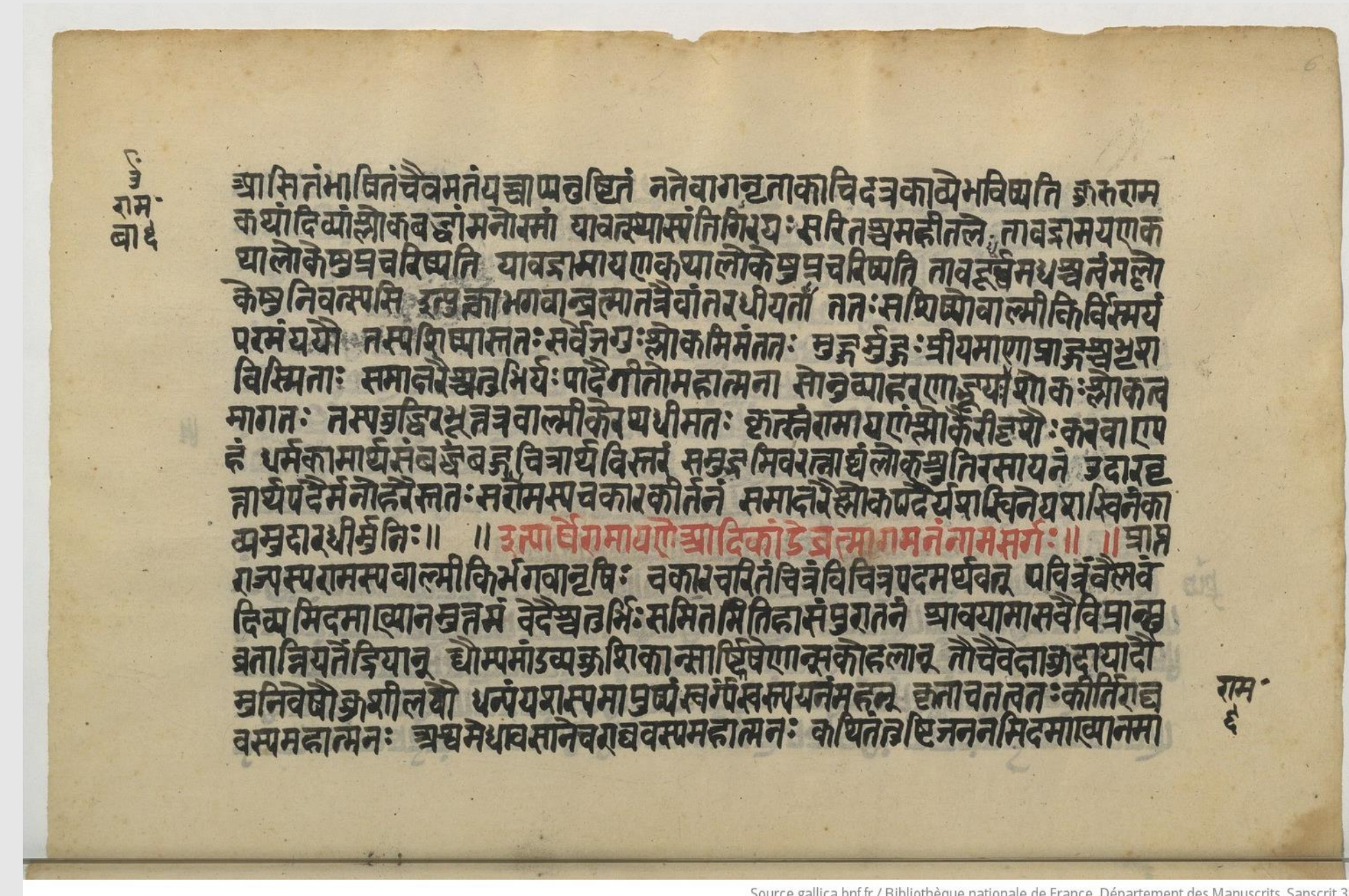
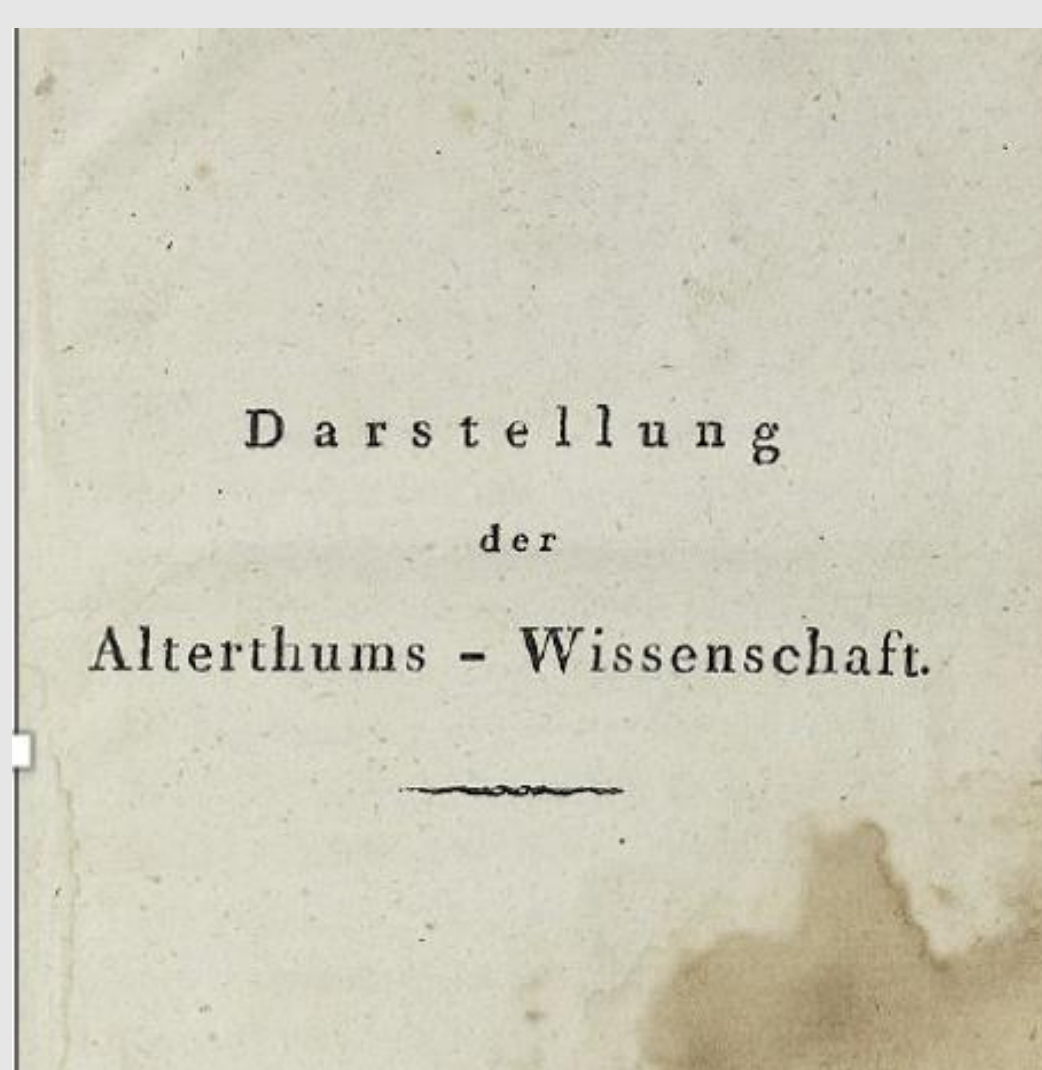
## Museum der Alterthums-Wissenschaft

In Berlin, Wolf in 1807 co-founded a (short-lived) journal, the *Museum der Alterthums-Wissenschaft* (*Museum of the Science of Antiquity*) with the Hellenist Philipp Buttmann (1764-1829). The two editors dedicated the journal to Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), whom Wolf counted among his friends. The dedication has a strong didactic and patriotic dimension: Wolf and Buttmann address Goethe as the German in whose works the Greek spirit 'took a second dwelling' and whose example could inspire 'the teachable youth of the fatherland' to study antiquity.

## 'Darstellung der Alterthums-Wissenschaft'

The first article in the inaugural 1807 issue of the *Museum der Alterthums-Wissenschaft* was a programmatic essay by Wolf, the 'Darstellung der Alterthums-Wissenschaft' ('Presentation of the Science of Antiquity').

In this epoch-making essay, Wolf set out his vision of what a 'scientific' study of antiquity should entail. He limited the study of 'antiquity' to Greece and Rome 776 BCE –1453 CE and 754 BCE–476 CE, excluding all other ancient peoples. At the same time, he laid out twenty-four subdisciplines this study should entail, ranging from textual criticism to epigraphy to the history of the discipline. Thus, Wolf on the one hand broadened the field, calling for a holistic approach to the study of antiquity going beyond the study of texts (which, however, he gave a privileged position). On the other, by excluding all other ancient languages he narrowed down the field, separating the study of Greek and Latin from the study of oriental languages, especially Hebrew.

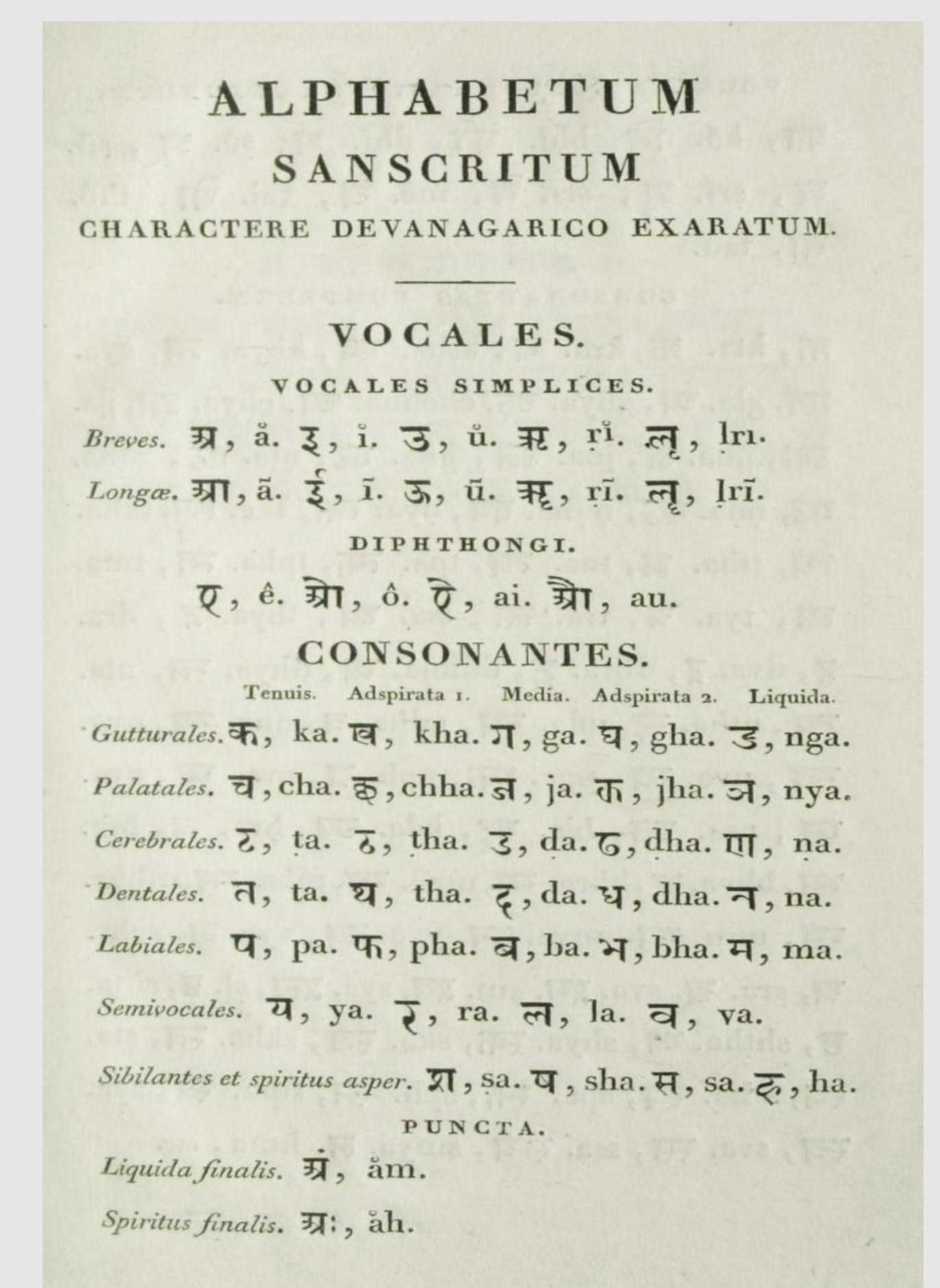


The *Rāmāyaṇa* manuscript 'Sanskrit 383' (here fol. 6v @ gallica.bnf.fr), still preserved in Paris, served as Schlegel's model for the creation of his typefont. The elegant, round-shaped script of this manuscript constituted the perfect starting point for Schlegel's font.

Schlegel's *Specimen novae typographiae indicae* appeared in Paris in 1821.

The true innovation lay in his printing method, which offered a way to considerably simplify the printing of Devanāgarī. He decided to embed the vowels—marked with diacritical signs above and below the consonant or consonant group—as well as other small diacritics within the single body of the consonants. This approach allowed him to produce all the desired combinations using only 250 punches.

Schlegel's ongoing quest for an ideal font led him to make continuous improvements in printing techniques and typefaces over the years, which he used for his own works and shared with Berlin and Paris.



## ERC PhiSci

This interdisciplinary project develops a novel framework to understand how philology – the historical study of text and language – achieved extraordinary success in nineteenth-century Europe. It examines how the textual and linguistic study of languages, across different countries, established itself as the premier science of the 19th century, funded on a large scale and setting standards across disciplines.

Wolf's vision was influential not least because of the network he was part of: among his friends was Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), who shared his vision and who as minister of Culture and Education charged with setting up the university founded in Berlin in 1810 played a key role in bringing philology to prominence.

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