

# What Does This Blasted Thing Say?

(What Does This Blasted Thing Say?)

by Walt Vogdes



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Stein collectors, be they novice or old-hand, understandably want to know what is written on their steins. Translation to English is difficult in its own right, but simply **transcribing** the words written in **old German print** (in one of many *Fraktur* fonts) can be daunting. If you don't think this is a problem, just look at the questions asked in **SteinTalk**, or in the listings of steins for sale on eBay. It's really no wonder that figuring out what those letters actually are is so difficult - use of these alphabets was being discontinued in German schools in the late 1930's, and completely ended in the 1940's. Consequently, your 50-year old German cousin or brother-in-law is quite possibly not familiar with this alphabet.

Ä ä	A a
Ï ï	Ae ae
ß ß	B b
Ç ç	C c
Ð ð	D d
È è	E e
Ë ë	F f
Ö ö	G g
Š š	H h
İ i	I i
Ĵ ĵ	J j
Œ œ	K k

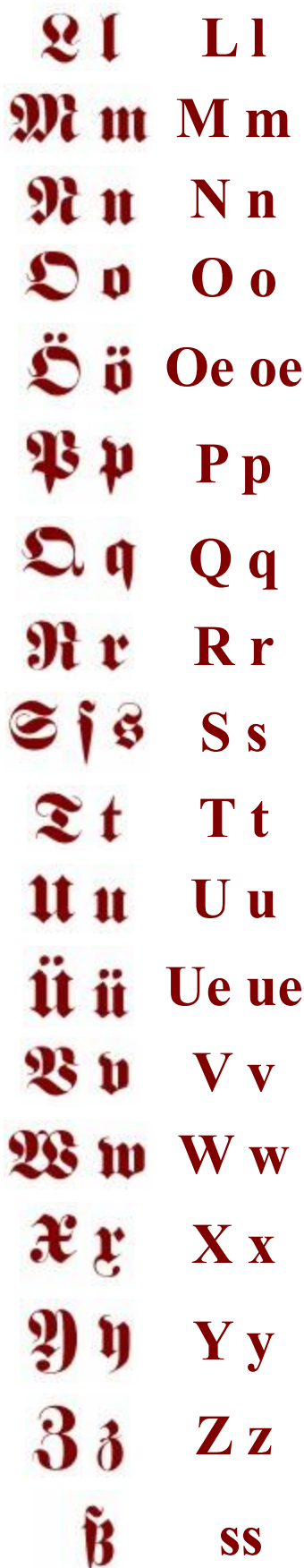
This article uses the FetteFraD font to illustrate the old German lettering. This type of font is most commonly found on hand-lettered regimental steins, but is also occasionally found in verses or banners on other types of steins.

The old German letter set is shown down the left margin of this article, with Roman equivalents. The first thing to note is that there are 30 letters provided, 29 in both upper and lower case, plus one (the last one in the table) only in lower case, not the standard 26 that we are accustomed to dealing with. Where do the extra ones arise?

- Three of the extra letters are variants of the three vowels a, o and u with an umlaut added to guide pronunciation (Ä and ä, Ö and ö, and Ü and ü). When transcribed, these characters are usually represented as **ae**, **oe**, and **ue**.
- The fourth additional character (ß) is shown last in the alphabet and known as "ess-zet", meaning "sz". It is actually a special character used for the occurrence of a double s – but only when the double s occurs at the end of a word! (Well, actually it's not quite that simple, because many German words are compound words made up of two or more other words, and the ess-zet is used if one of those shorter elements ends in a double s. But this is really digging into the fine points, and if this is the only part of the transcription you have trouble with, you are in good shape.)

Ooops, something else you may notice. There are two flavors of small s (bringing the total number of lower case letters to 31). What's this about?

- We will refer to the small s which is shown in the middle of our chart as "middle s". It is used only at the beginning or in the middle of a word.
- The second small s, which is called "schloos s" or closing s, is used only to end a word, or at the end of a syllable.
- Of course, these rules of usage are also subject to the effects of compound words as discussed above.



A very common example of the usage of both double s ("ess-zet") and the closing s ("schloos s") is given in figure 2 in the familiar "Greetings from Munich".

## Gruß aus München

By now you must recognize that transcription must be done with a sensitivity to the surrounding letters and the position of the letters within the word.

Ooops, upon taking a closer look we discover that the capital letters I and J are the same! I'll leave it to the philosophers to figure out if this means we have 29 or 30 upper case letters, but how do we distinguish them?

- When it precedes a consonant, this character is transcribed as I, when it precedes a vowel it is transcribed as J.

We're finally done with the inventory of old German letters which is shown to the left. Unfortunately, there is still one very common and important convention in German writing that has the effect of adding even more letters to the old German alphabet.

- An overlined consonant means the letter should be doubled in transcription to the Roman alphabet.

That's all there is to explaining the inventory and usage of the old German print alphabet, but let's take a closer look at some problem areas.

Upper case B, P and V all look similar:



Lower case case f, k, t and middle s are easily confused.

Careful examination of these letters, an understanding of when the special characters were used, and a sensitivity to the context of the words or phrase you are trying to transcribe will normally do the trick. Also keep in mind that the letter set shown in this article is only one of many that were used, so expect to find variations.

One "true life" example is taken from a 4F stein (right). Context plus the chart at the left allows us to transcribe this as "X. Deutsches Turnfest, Nuernberg 1903".



Now that the necessary tools have been provided to allow transcription, you've got at least a fighting chance at getting a translation.