

*A Variable Font for Medievalists (and others), by Thornbec Stæfwyrhta*

18pt @ 26 &amp; 24

18pt Medium @ 20

Regular (12pt)

iopt

Insular 8pt

6pt

14pt Semibold Norse

Regular (12pt) Runic

10pt Bold Runic

8pt Light Runic

Regular (12pt) Light

ExtraLight @ 10

Medium IPA @ 10

ə lən tɑjm ə'go, wen əj wəz dʒɑst  
 'stɑ:tnŋ awt, əj hæd ðə gud 'fʌnfən  
 tə mit ðə gʌt 'wɪlə 'kæðə. wɪð əl  
 ði ə'dæsəti əv juθ, əj æskt həl wʌt  
 əd'vɑjs fɪ wʊd grɪv ðə 'wʊd,bi 'rɑ:təl  
 ənd fɪ.sə'plɑ:d: məj əd'vɑjs tə ðə 'wʊd  
 ə lən tɑjm ə'go, wen əj wəz dʒɑst  
 'stɑ:tnŋ awt, əj hæd ðə gud 'fʌnfən  
 tə mit ðə gʌt 'wɪlə 'kæðə. wɪð əl  
 ði ə'dæsəti əv juθ, əj æskt həl wʌt  
 əd'vɑjs fɪ wʊd grɪv ðə 'wʊd,bi 'rɑ:təl  
 ənd fɪ.sə'plɑ:d: məj əd'vɑjs tə ðə 'wʊd

## What is a variable font?

A *variable font* is one that can do the work of a very large number of conventional fonts by varying the characters' shapes in ways designed by the font's creator. These variations are controlled by one or more *axes*, the most common of which is *weight*. Most traditional font families have two weights—regular and bold—but in a variable font the weight can be varied continuously from lightest to heaviest.

Elstob has three axes in both the roman and italic faces: *weight*, *optical size*, and *grade*.

The *weight* axis runs from 200 (ExtraLight) to 800 (**ExtraBold**), with 400 (Regular) as the default.

The *optical size* axis varies several aspects of the characters' shapes (especially x-height and contrast) for the best look at particular sizes. The scale for this axis (6–18) corresponds to point sizes (though you *can* use any optical size at any point size). Where instances (axis presets which work like static fonts) are named with point sizes, these are recommended for use at those sizes.

*Grade* is like weight, but with one crucial difference: it varies the weight of characters without changing their width. This is useful in web pages, for it allows you to dynamically change the weight of text (for example, on mouseover) without forcing the text to reflow.

## OpenType features

OpenType is a font format that enables many advanced typographical features. For example, the ligatures in words like “office” and “afflict” are enabled by OpenType features, and so are discretionary ligatures like those in “se&t” and “store,” TRUE SMALL CAPS (not the scaled capitals produced by some applications) and old-style figures (1234 as opposed to 1234).

Elstob has these common OpenType features and many more: English þ and ð, in&uarr let&uarr shaper, automated use of long s with correct English and French rules (also a number of ligatures for potentially awkward combinations in words like affist and flash), automated r rotunda with contextual rules (producing, e.g., “o&uarrder” and “b&uarrther” but not “earn” or “first”), and automated transliteration of roman characters into runes (your choice of English futhorc, Elder futhark, or Younger futhark—long branch or short twig).

Contextual alternates are used to prevent collisions in words like s&uorring (compare the ð in suð) and for aesthetic purposes: compare, for example, the Q in Q&uorringest with the one in LGBTQ, and the p in p&uorringvent with the one in h&uorringp.

In the italic face, Elstob has several swash capitals (e.g. A, J, P) as well as swash z and k.

## Medieval features

If all you needed were the letters commonly used in medieval texts, many general-purpose fonts would do the trick. For example, Times New Roman has a perfectly good þ and ð for Old English, and a 3 for Middle English. But while the shapes of þ and ð in Times are correct for modern Icelandic, þ and ð are preferable for Old and Middle English.

The Unicode standard provides a number of medieval characters. Elstob contains a generous selection of the ones most generally useful to medievalists, and these have been handled with more than the usual care.

Consider, for example, the common Latin abbreviation for *-us*. Unicode provides two characters for this abbreviation: one that takes up space in a line of text, like a letter, and another that works like a diacritic, being attached to another character. Most diacritics are centered on the letters they modify (e.g. ü), but in manuscripts the *-us* abbreviation, when above a letter, is usually offset to the right. Elstob follows this common manuscript usage, e.g. salt, mun. Where a location above the base character would look awkward, the abbreviation is still raised, but placed to the right, e.g. A, I. Diacritics can be stacked in Elstob, and then they are usually

centered on top of one another. But in Elstob (as in most manuscripts), another diacritic instead pushes the *-us* sign to the right (e.g. q).

The spacing *-us* sign can look awkward in certain combinations, e.g. following A and f (A, f). These and many other combinations are kerned (their spacing adjusted) in Elstob so that they always look good: A, f.

A sampling of other medieval characters in Elstob: q, l, æ, ætri, 9solatio, p&uorringcm, p&uorringcm, q, q. All of these, of course, work just as well in italic as in roman.

## About this typeface

*It is named for Elizabeth Elstob (1683–1756), a celebrated early scholar of Old English language and literature, closely connected with the Oxford “Saxonists” of that time. The font is based, however, not on Elstob’s own publications, but on a typeface then employed by the Oxford University Press.*

*This was one of a number of typefaces commissioned by Bishop John Fell (1625–86) for use by the press and cut by the Dutch designer Peter de Walpergen (1646–1703). The model for Elstob is de Walpergen’s Double Pica. However, Elstob is not a reproduction or a revival of this typeface, which it differs from in many respects—especially its vastly expanded repertory of characters.*

