

## The Exotic Croatian Glagolitic Alphabet

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*Dedicated to the memory of Gordan Lederer  
(1958–1991)*

Just for fun, one day I decided to write my own name in Glagolitic letters. I was very proud of the result: **𐌀𐌆𐌋𐌌𐌊 𐌆𐌆𐌆𐌆𐌆𐌆𐌆𐌆**. Without creating TEX Prof. Donald Knuth probably would have never had opportunity to see his name written as

**𐌀𐌆𐌋𐌌𐌊 𐌆𐌆𐌆𐌆𐌆𐌆𐌆𐌆**.

(The h = 𐌆 was dropped because it is not pronounced.)

The origins of the Croatian Glagolitic alphabet are still mysterious. The only thing we can state for sure is that it has existed in my homeland for more than a thousand years, i.e. since the ninth century. Croats have been living in their homeland since the seventh century and they were the first among Slavs to be Christianized. It used to be generally regarded that the Glagolitic alphabet was created by St. Cyrill, a Greek apostle from Thessaloniki, but now there exist several very different theories about its origins. However, the fact that Croats had already been Christianized when St. Cyrill was born (825), together with the unique multiorthographic tradition of written documents (Glagolitic, Latin, Cyrillic) in medieval Croatia, and above all, more than a thousand years' history of Glagolitic script in Croatia, seem to prove that the origins of Glagolitic script are *authentically Croatian*.

One of the earliest Glagolitic inscriptions we know of in Croatia can be seen on a stone monument found in the church of St. Lucy near the city of Bashka on the island of Krk, dating back to around 1100 AD. It is the oldest known monument written in my native tongue which mentions the name of Croatia (i.e. Hrvatska) and the name of the Croatian king Zvonimir.

Through the Glagolitic alphabet Croats kept in touch with other European cultures of the Middle Ages. For example, in 1347 the famous Czech king Charles IV established a Glagolitic convent near Prague, where Croatian priests were teaching the Glagolitic alphabet. Similarly, the Polish king Wladislaw II Yagiell organized (in 1390) a Glagolitic convent near Krakow.

Especially interesting is the story of the old Glagolitic book handwritten on the island of Krk in Croatia, that somehow came from Prague to Reims in France. There, for centuries afterwards, French kings were sworn in by putting their hands on this holy book (it still exists).

In 1248, by the decree of Pope Innocent IV, Croats were allowed to practise Glagolitic liturgy (i.e. early Croatian), using holy books written in Glagolitic instead of Latin or Greek. This decision of the Pope was unique in medieval Europe—Croats were the only nation in Europe who were allowed to use their own language in liturgy instead of Latin.

Even today the Glagolitic liturgy is preserved in some parts of Croatia, with priests still singing in early Croatian language as in St. Cyrill's time (the ninth century!). The Glagolitic alphabet has probably been our most important cultural monument for thirteen centuries of difficult, but rich life in Europe.

As for the name of Croatia, let me mention by the way that the French and German names for tie—*cravate* and *die Krawate*—were coined from it. It would take us too far from our purpose to tell in detail this very interesting story.

There are thousands of monuments, pergament letters and books written in the Glagolitic alphabet. One of the most beautiful certainly is "Misal" (or **𐌆𐌆𐌆𐌆𐌆**), printed in 1483, most probably in the Croatian town of Kosing, only 37 years after Gutenberg's invention, or only six years after the first printed books appeared in Paris and Venice, or 70 years before the first book was printed in Moscow. Like Gutenberg's Bible, it has many ligatures. Unfortunately, in 1493 there was a penetration of the Turkish Ottoman Empire, which was stopped in Croatia (until the XIXth century!). This did not allow a normal development of printing as in other parts of Europe. Despite very difficult conditions many Glagolitic documents bear witness to surprisingly rich cultural activity in medieval Croatia, especially on the island of Krk and the Istrian peninsula.

Glagolitic books for Croatian priests were also printed in Venice, which even had two Glagolitic churches at one time, then in Rome. With the help of Croatian protestants books were printed in Wittenberg and Urach in Germany. One of the founders of protestantism in Europe was the Croatian philosopher Flacius Illiricus. The Glagolitic alphabet was also taught in the city of Dubrovnik. Besides in Croatia, Croatian books and manuscripts written in the Glagolitic alphabet are now kept in Rome, Sankt Petersburg, Berlin, Vienna, Innsbruck, Moscow, Copenhagen, London, Oxford, Constantinople, Paris, Tours, New York, Krakow, Porto, Budapest, Trento, Padova, Sienna, and some other places.

There are a few Glagolitic letters that came from Greek, like **ϕ** (f), **ε** (e); the letter **𐌆** (sh) came

