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MU archaeologists reveal oldest writing system among Slavs to be Germanic runes

A one-of-a-kind discovery has been made by archaeologists from Masaryk University. At the Láňy-Břeclav site in the Czech Republic, they found an inscribed animal rib alongside pottery of the Prague type, associated with the Early Slavs. This unique find provides the earliest evidence of the use of a writing system among Slavs. The bone, however, is inscribed with Germanic runes and is therefore not written in the Glagolitic script, which was previously thought to be the first writing system used among Slavs.

“The inscribed bone we excavated in 2017 was studied by an international team of researchers from the Czech Republic, Austria, Switzerland, and Australia that found it to be the oldest inscription ever discovered among Slavs. This is a major discovery of not just national significance but of European importance,” said Jiří Macháček, head of the Department of Archaeology and Museology of MU’s Faculty of Arts and leader of the international team.

The latest genetic and radiocarbon dating methods were used to analyse the bone. The age of the inscription was confirmed through use-wear analysis combined with SEM microscopy. “These sensitive analyses revealed the bone to be that of a cattle which lived in approximately 600 CE,” said Zuzana Hofmanová, a member of the team from the University of Fribourg who specializes in analysing ancient DNA.

Robert Nedoma, an expert on Germanic languages from the University of Vienna, identified the inscription to be written in Older Futhark. This script was used by Germanic-speaking inhabitants of Central Europe from the second to seventh centuries CE. The Older Futhark alphabet consists of 24 runes, the seven last of which were inscribed on the recently discovered rib fragment. It is likely that the entire alphabet was originally inscribed on the bone. The bone was not inscribed with a specific message. Instead, it seems to be a learning aid, an idea that the several mistakes in the inscription lend weight to. Currently, European researchers are aware of only 17 inscriptions containing complete or partial lines of Older Futhark.

Until this discovery, the oldest writing system among Slavs was considered to be the Glagolitic script, which was brought to Moravia from the Byzantine Empire in the ninth century CE by Saints Constantine /Cyril and Methodius. This ground-breaking discovery made by archaeologists from Masaryk University demonstrates that before the introduction of the Glagolitic script the Slavs had come into contact with runes, which they may have used for counting or divination, for example. This finding also calls into question whether cultural differences between Germanic and Slavic Europe were so clear cut. “The fact that it is the earliest evidence of writing among Slavs is certainly interesting for the nearly 300 million people who speak Slavic languages,” added Macháček.

Inscriptions in Old Germanic runes are often associated with Germanic mythology. Today, people may encounter them in various fantasy films, such as those of the *Lord of the Rings* series, or in video games.

The archaeologists from MU published their findings in *Journal of Archaeological Science (Volume 127)*, one of the most prominent international journals in the field. Once researchers complete their

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study of the site, which is still ongoing and as part of the EXPRO project supported by the Czech Science Foundation, the Lány runes will be exhibited to the public at Masaryk University.

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