

# Right-to-left Cyrillic among the Bogomils?

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In his famous book on scripts and religion, Mieses (1919: 325) reports that “The Manichaeian-Bogomil Bulgarians left behind some inscriptions in a Cyrillic script written from right to left rather than from left to right”. In my quest to find these inscriptions through a web of imprecise quotations without references, I found out that what he meant were actually members of the Bosnian Church. Indeed, in Bosnia one can find exactly two inscriptions that look inverted, on a *stećak* for Vlatko Vlađević and a tomb slab for Pavao Komlinović. After considering other possible explanations for the reversed inscriptions (secret writing, magic, direction of objects), the unspectacular solution seems to be that the stonemasons engraving the letters were illiterate and made technical mistakes. A brief inspection of other cases of “schismatic” changes in writing direction cited by Mieses reveals that none of them is actually caused by a change in religion, and his hypothesis can be rejected completely.

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“[The Eiffel Tower] was the work of a German Jew, the Jewish response to the Sacré-Coeur, explained de Biez. He was perhaps the most combative anti-Semite in the group, who began his demonstration about Jewish inferiority from the fact that they write in the opposite way to normal people. ‘The very form of this Babylonian construction,’ he said, ‘demonstrates that their brain is not made like ours. ...’” (Umberto Eco, *The Prague Cemetery*, 437, ch. 23)

## 1. Introduction

In the course of my work on biscriptality, I came across a statement that I had to investigate and that ultimately offered me a deep insight, if not into the linguistics of writing itself (an interest that Sebastian Kempgen and I share), then at least into the history of the discipline:

“Die manichäisch-bogumilischen Bulgaren hinterließen einige Inschriften in einer linksläufigen statt rechtsläufigen kyrillischen Schrift.” (Mieses 1919: 325)

“The Manichaeian-Bogomil Bulgarians left behind some inscriptions in a Cyrillic script written from right to left rather than from left to right.”

This statement appears in the book *Die Gesetze der Schriftgeschichte* (*The Laws of the History of Writing*) by Matthias Mieses (1919)—an important work, not only because it is one of the first scientific monographs on the linguistics of writing, but also because it refutes a notion of writing that was widespread at the time, namely that each ‘race’ had its own script. According to this view, the script specific to the Germanic peoples (or “Aryans”) is blackletter (the “German script”), THE SCRIPT OF THE ROMANCE PEOPLES IS ANTIQUA, THAT OF THE JEWS IS HEBREW, AND THE “REAL” SLAVS USE THE CYRILLIC ALPHABET. Mieses refutes this racist theory of writing by showing that writing fundamentally follows religion and not race:

„Von den Mitgliedern der uralaltaischen Rasse schreiben die Ungarn mit lateinischen Lettern, die Finnen und Esten mit Frakturbuchstaben und die Türken mit arabischen Schriftzeichen. Warum? Weil sie glaubensverschieden sind. Die Ungarn sind katholisch. Die Finnen und Esten verdanken ihre Glaubensform dem trotzig Augustinermönch von Wittenberg. Die Türken beten mit dem Gesicht nach Mekka.“ (Mieses 1919: 10)

“Of the members of the Uralo-Altai race, the Hungarians write in Latin letters, the Finns and Estonians in blackletter, and the Turks in Arabic characters. Why? Because they have different beliefs. The Hungarians are Catholics. The Finns and Estonians owe their form of belief to the defiant Augustinian monk from Wittenberg. The Turks pray with their faces towards Mecca.”

▮ 116 Even though this certainly does not apply always and everywhere, and Mieses overshoots the mark in many places, his approach is definitely much closer to the truth than the racist theory of writing. In Slavic Studies, we are also familiar with Riccardo Picchio’s (1958) distinction between *Slavia Romana* and *Slavia Orthodoxa*, which largely corresponds to the use of the Latin and Cyrillic alphabets, respectively.

## 2. In search of right-to-left inscriptions

Mieses (1919: 325–342) devotes a whole chapter to the question of writing direction.<sup>1</sup> In his opinion, it was primarily schisms within the same religion that led to the choice of a different writing direction. In this context, he also makes the statement that prompted this article: Bogomils who write Bulgarian in Cyrillic script, but in reverse? Does such a thing really exist? I wanted to check this out. Mieses

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<sup>1</sup> The direction of writing is indeed deeply ingrained in the general consciousness. I still remember an experience from the time when one still had to place copy orders in the copy departments of Eastern European libraries. In L’viv, the photocopier dispensed the paper with the printed side facing up, thus reversing the order of the pages, which the library employee, who had probably been making copies for years, did not seem to have noticed. So when I asked her to please start copying the book from the back, she replied in astonishment: «Вы араб, что ли?» (“Are you an Arab or what?”)

refers to Renner (1897), who, however, reports only one such inscription on a Bosnian *stećak*, one of those mostly cuboid or sarcophagus-shaped medieval grave-stones typical of the region, which were included in the World Cultural Heritage on 15 July 2016 (cf. UNESCO 2016):<sup>2</sup>

„Auf dem Wege nach Rogatica und um diese Stadt selbst finden sich zahlreiche römische und bogomilische Grabsteine. Mommsen hat schon einen in seiner Sammlung beschrieben, andere sind von Dr. Blau und Dr. Hoernes näher bestimmt worden. Unter den Bogomilsteinen sind einige bemerkenswerth wegen der sonst sehr selten vorkommenden Aufschriften. So lautet die eine, die auffallenderweise von rechts nach links zu lesen ist: ‚Va ime otca i sina i sv. duha. Ovdi leži Vlatko Vladjević [...].‘“ (Renner 1897: 268 f.)

“On the way to Rogatica and around that town itself, there are numerous Roman and Bogomil gravestones. Mommsen has already described one of them in his collection, while others have been specified in more detail by Dr. Blau and Dr. Hoernes. Among the Bogomil stones, some are noteworthy because of their inscriptions, which are otherwise very rare. One of them, which strikingly is to be read from right to left, says: ‘Va ime otca i sina i sv. duha. Ovdi leži Vlatko Vladjević [...].’”

▮ 117 Unfortunately, there are no more explicit references here other than the surnames and doctoral titles, so that it took some time to locate the sources on which Renner based his work. The cited “Dr. Hoernes” describes the cemetery of Lađevine (in the municipality of Rogatica, 70 km east of Sarajevo, today in Republika Srpska) in more detail:

„Hier freuten sich nach den theils von links nach rechts, theils retrograd geschriebenen und nur theilweise lesbaren glagolitischen Epitaphien der riesigsten Grabsteinblöcke der Vojevode Mitoš mit seinem Sohne Stjepko und [der] gnädige Fürst Pavao und der Erzvojevode Mitoš und der [...] edle Ban Vlatko Vlačević lange vor dem Einbruch der Türken ihres dunklen Daseins; hier wurden sie nach ihrem Tode [...] in der tiefen, fruchtbaren Erde gebettet – ohne Sarg und ohne Gruft, wie unsere Nachgrabungen zeigten [...].“ (Hoernes 1888: 238)

“Here, according to the Glagolitic epitaphs on the largest gravestones, only partially legible and some written from left to right, some backwards, the vojvode Mitoš with his son Stjepko and [the] gracious Prince Pavao and Archvojvode Mitoš and the [...] noble Ban Vlatko Vlačević enjoyed their dark existence long before the Turkish invasion; here they were laid to rest after their death [...] in the deep, fertile earth—without coffins or tombs, as our excavations showed [...].”

<sup>2</sup> The application was submitted jointly in 2009 by Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia.

All this is quite reminiscent of the children's game *broken telephone*: Hoernes, Renner and Miseses all report the striking fact that inscriptions are written from right to left, but they disagree on their number (one? many?), the ethnic affiliation of their authors (Bulgarians? Bosnians?) and the script in which they are written (Cyrillic? Glagolitic?). One wonders if any of them has really read the inscriptions with his own eyes.

▣ 118 A minor detail might illustrate the way these travelogues seem to have been written: Hoernes's (1888: 237) drawing of the graveyard (Fig. 1) seems to have been copied by Renner (1897: 265; Fig. 2). The latter's illustration shows the stones viewed from exactly the same angle and in exactly the same position, but while Hoernes (1888: 238) calls the scenery "extremely lovely" ("äußerst lieblich"), Renner shows the graveyard with a different, much rougher landscape around it. The different romantic impressions that the illustrators wanted to convey seem to have been more important than factual accuracy (to which, as the current photo of *stećci* in the immediate vicinity of Lađevine in Fig. 3<sup>3</sup> shows, Hoernes came closer than Renner).

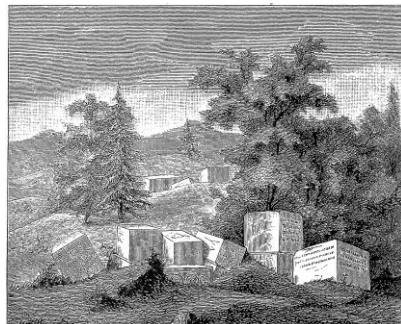


Fig. 1: Lađevine according to Hoernes

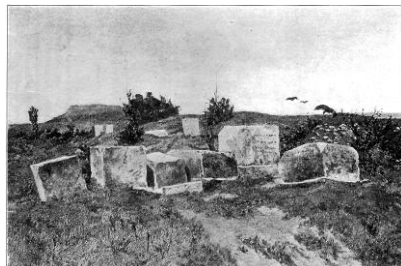


Fig. 2: Lađevine according to Renner



Fig. 3: Varošište today

### 3. The tombstone of Vlatko Vlađević

However, the name of Vlatko Vlađević mentioned by Hoernes and Renner is well-known. His gravestone from the beginning of the 15th century (between 1399 and 1415, cf. Vego 1981: 52) has been moved from Lađevine to the yard of the National Museum (*Zemaljski muzej*) in Sarajevo, and Marko Vego ▣ 119 (1981: 51–52), the

<sup>3</sup> Since the most interesting *stećci* from Lađevine are now in the National Museum in Sarajevo, the place no longer looks as it did at the end of the 19th century. Photos of Lađevine and other cemeteries in Rogatica can be found in Durmišević (2011), from which Fig. 3 is taken (<http://oi47.tinypic.com/el4ihg.jpg>, last accessed 28 August 2016 [and not accessible anymore as of 2026]). The villages of Lađevine and Varošište are 2 km apart.

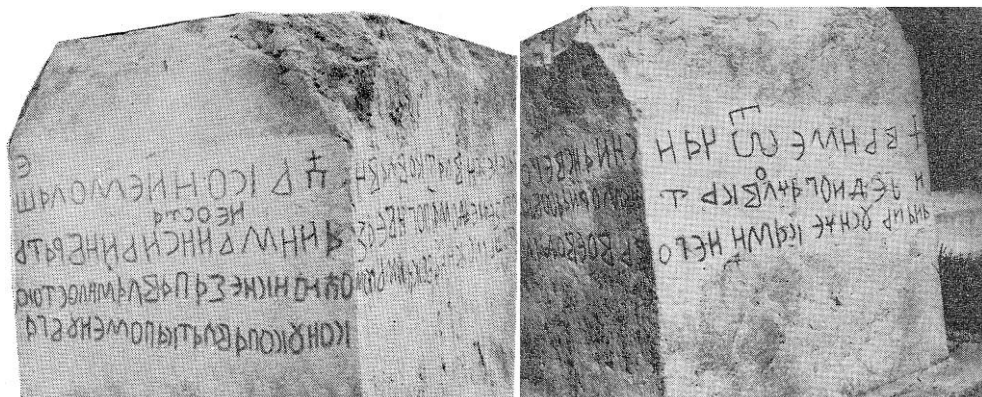


Fig. 4: Photos of Vlatko Vlađević's gravestone

museum's former director, has printed two photographs of the stone (Fig. 4).<sup>4</sup> These show that the inscription on the gravestone is in Cyrillic (not Glagolitic) and a variety of Serbo-Croatian (not Bulgarian)—and really runs from right to left, with all the letters being mirrored. Following Mazalić's (1941: 88) transcript, which was approved by Vego (1981: 51), the inscription reads as follows:

1:1 † ВЪ НМЕ ВЦА Н	† In the name of the Father and
2:1 СНА Н СВѢГО ДХА	the Son and the Holy Spirit.
3:1 А СЕ ЛЕЖИ ВЛАТКО ВЛА[ЉЕ]ВН-	Here lies Vlatko Vla[đe]vić,
4:1 ЉЪ КОИ НЕ МОЛАШЕ	who did not bow
1:2 НИ ЄДНОГА ЧЛОВ[Н]КЪ <sup>5</sup> Т-	to any man
2:2 АКМО ГЊА А ВЕНДЕ МН-	but his Lord and traveled
3:2 ОГО ЗЕМЛЕ А ДОМА ПОГНВЕ А З-	many countries and died at home and
4:2 А НИМЪ НЕ ОСТА НИ СНЪ НИ БРАТЬ	left no son or brother behind. ▢ 120
1:3 А НА НЪ УСНЧЕ КАМН НЕГО-	And the stone for him was carved
2:3 ВЪ ВОЕВОДА МНВ-	by his <i>vojevoda</i> <sup>6</sup> Mitoš

<sup>4</sup> The photos by Vego (1981: 51, 52) show all four inscribed sides of the stone: on the far right is side 1 and to its left part of side 2; the image on the left shows side 3 on the right and side 4 on the left. The transcription refers to this side numbering and also indicates line numbers.

<sup>5</sup> Mazalić (1941: 88) identifies the last letter of the word as ⟨а⟩—which would also be expected grammatically—although the photo shows that there is a clearly legible ⟨ь⟩, which here apparently represents the phoneme /a/, since ⟨ь⟩ can also represent /a/ in a 'strong' position elsewhere. (Given the consistency of the mirroring in the rest of the text, it is unlikely that this is simply an accidentally unmirrored form of ⟨а⟩.)

<sup>6</sup> The words *vojevoda* and *knez* are often translated as *duke* and *prince*, respectively. However, both words are so polysemous, especially in the Balkans, that I prefer to leave them unchanged in the translation. On Vlatko Vlađević's gravestone, on the one hand, *vojevoda* Mitoš is obviously subordinate to Vlatko, while *knez* Pavao (or Pavle) Radinović, who is

- 3:3 ТОШЬ С ЛЪЖИЦА БОЖИВМЪ ПОМ- of Lužice with God's help  
 4:3 ОЛЮ Н КНЕЗА ПАВАА МНЛОСТОЮ and with the grace of *knez*<sup>6</sup> Pavao,  
 4:4 КОИ ДКОПА ВЛАТКА ПОМЕНЪ БГА who buried Vlatko in the name of God.

As we have seen, Renner (1897: 268f.) identifies the gravestone as Bogomil, which apparently made Mieses extrapolate that therefore it had to be Bulgarian. Truhelka (1908: 423) even argues that Vlatko Vlađević “was without doubt a high dignitary of the Bogomil Church” (“da je i Vlatko Vlagjević bio bez sumnje visoki dostojanstvenik bogumilske crkve”). However, as the inscription begins with the symbol of the cross, this interpretation has to be adjusted: What is meant here by “Bogomils” is the Bosnian Church, which was often slandered as Bogomil, especially since some Bogomils from Bulgaria had indeed found refuge in Bosnia. However, the Bosnian Church was clearly not identical to them. One of the differences is that “Bogomils abhorred the sign of the cross; the cross appears on the head of several Bosnian Church documents” (Malcolm 1994: 38).<sup>7</sup>

▫ 121 Apart from that, Renner's attribution of the gravestone to the Bosnian Church is based on an outdated theory. As one can see ▫ 122 in Figures 1–4, the *stećci* differ significantly in appearance from other Christian gravestones. Their rectangular shape is “more or less peculiar to the Bosnian region” (Malcolm 1994: 30), but it also occurs in neighboring regions of Croatia, Serbia, and Montenegro. It was previously assumed that these *stećci* were a peculiarity of the Bosnian Church. However, even during the heyday of the Bosnian Church large parts of the Bosnian population continued to be Catholic or Orthodox, and if all the *stećci* belonged to members of the Bosnian Church, then there would be no medieval gravestones left for the Catholics and Orthodox (Malcolm 1994: 30f.).

Nevertheless, it is at least possible that Vlatko Vlađević was a member of the Bosnian Church. However, none of the inscriptions and manuscripts that can be unambiguously attributed to the Bosnian Church (e.g. the three inscriptions referring to *krstjanin* Radohna, *gost* Mišljen and *gost* Milutin examined by Miletić 1957,

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also known from historical sources to have ruled over a considerable area, is his lord (cf. Vego 1981: 52). On the other hand, in the inscription discussed below, *knez* Pavao Komlinović is clearly subordinate to *vojevoda* Sandalj Hranić Kosača, who ruled over an even larger area (cf. the map by Panonian 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Miletić (1957) has shown that much of what we know about the Bosnian Church, especially its titles (e.g., *krstjanin* ‘Christian’ for a monk, *gost* ‘host’ for an abbot), resembles the pre-Benedictine monastic organizations known from Celtic Christianity. She describes the medieval Bosnian Church as “a branch of the Basilians, more precisely of those ancient proto-Basilians whose monasticism preserved the oldest elements and was linked to the Egyptian tradition of the first hermits and anchorites” (“un ramo dei basiliani, e precisamente di quelli antichi, protobasiliani, il cui monachismo era il depositario dei più antichi elementi e si riallacciava alla tradizione egiziana dei primi eremiti ed anacoreti”, Miletić 1957: 183; cf. the approving account in Malcolm 1994: 34–36).


or the manuscripts enumerated by Hercigonja 2006: 101, fn. 35) seem to be written from right to left.

#### 4. Various theories for right-to-left writing

Vego (1981: 53) mentions only one other Cyrillic inscription with right-to-left text sections, namely the inscription on Pavao Komlinović's *stećak* in the cemetery of Bakri near Čitluk in Herzegovina. He explains the use of mirrored text in both inscriptions as "secret writing" ("tajno pismo", *ibid.*). Obviously, this conclusion is based on Mazalić (1941: 88, fn. 150), who mentions the writing direction of Vlatko Vlađević's gravestone only in a footnote:

"Nadpis je ispisan tajnim načinom pisanja, naopako. Zašto ne može se reći. Svakako nije pod uticajem turskog pisma, na što se ranije pomišljalo."

"The inscription is written in a secret form of writing, backwards. It is impossible to say why. In any case, it was not under the influence of the Turkish script, as was previously thought."

Indeed, before assuming that an obviously Christian gravestone inscribed before the Ottoman conquest mimics the Arabic writing direction, one would like to see a few dozen  Cyrillic documents by Muslim Slavs from the Ottoman era to be written from right to left. To my knowledge, there is not a single example of this.

However, the thesis that this is secret writing has the same problem: I do not know of any instance where this crude encryption method was used to encode a text that was really meant to be top secret. Those few cases of reversed writing that Sobolevskij (2007 [1902]: 53f.), Karskij (1928: 253), Čerepnin (1956: 395) and Ščepkin (1999: 162) mention seem not to have been used for serious purposes. Take, for example, the inscription "† зшорг аз зшург ѿд умот ѣтчорп еис отк а †" (quoted by all authors): 'Decoded', it reads "† а кто сие прочтѣ тому да ррушз за грощз †" ("† To whoever reads this, I will give pears for a penny †").

A better example, also from the East Slavic region, might be the inscription on a church bell of St. George's Cathedral in L'viv: After mentioning the year 1341,

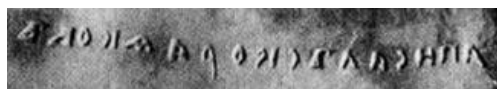



Fig. 5: Inscription on a church bell (1341)

Saint George and the names of the current prince and abbot, the artisan doing all the work probably felt the desire to immortalize his own name as well but knew that this wish was not seemly. Therefore, he wrote his

name in mirror-writing: "а писалъ скоро аковъ" ("Jakov Skora wrote it", cf. Fig. 5; Peščak 1974: 22–23). Speranskij (1929: 43) cites a similar note in a Serbian manuscript from 1670 recording in reversed letters that "the hand of sinful, lazy Dimitrij" ("роука грѣшнаго Димитрія лениваго") wrote the text.

However, there does not seem to be any motivation for secret writing on Vlatko's *stećak*: Why should anyone want to keep the inscription on a gravestone secret?

Another reason why a text might be inverted, which does not seem to have been considered in the context of this inscription so far, is magic. An example of this is the fragmentary Novgorod *gramota* № 674 from the end of the 12th century, which was used as a talisman  124 (*obereg*, cf. Zaliznjak 2004: 462–463). It bore the words “[Ѡ] гласа вражиа и Ѡ сотоужьниа грѣшьница [i.e. ...стоужениа грѣшьнича]” (“... from the voice of the enemy and from the oppression of the wicked”) from Psalm 54/55:4 (and originally perhaps something like “Keep me” before it, cf. Zaliznjak 2004: 463). The mirroring of such a text is a remnant of pagan magical beliefs and was supposed to enhance the power of the talisman: By writing bad things backwards, you turn them into something good. However, in the case of the birch bark, there is an obvious connection between the content of the text and the magic it was supposed to bring about: the Novgorod talisman was written from right to left to protect its bearer “from the voice of the enemy and from the oppression of the wicked”. In contrast to this, the text of Vlatko's gravestone is completely referential and does not include any appellative elements. If this had been meant as a kind of magic spell, then the angels or demons who were supposed to work the magic would not have known what to do.

A final reason for reversed writing directions that should be briefly mentioned here is the idea that objects have a natural direction and that writing should follow this direction. For example, inscriptions on vehicles in China usually run from the front to the rear, which means that the writing on the left side of the vehicle runs from left to right, but on the right side it runs from right to left. For example, Wilde et al. (2005–2016) show a Chinese postal service vehicle with the inscription “中国邮政” on the left door and the English translation “CHINA POST” below it, but “政邮国中” and “TSOP ANIHC” on the right door (in each case without mirroring the characters). Similarly, one could imagine that in the case of the *stećci*, the deceased himself dictated the direction of the writing. Mirror writing could thus be justified by the fact that it should be legible from the inside—this could well explain the inscription on the stone block for Vlatko Vlađević. However, if this were the reason, one would expect to see more examples of it, similar to how most vehicles, market stalls, etc. in China are labeled from front to back, and similar to how anthropomorphic and zoomorphic characters in Egyptian burial chambers consistently face in the opposite direction to other texts (cf. fn. 12). However, since mirror writing occurs only twice on the more than 70,000 preserved *stećci*, this explanation is also rather unlikely.

## 5. The tombstone of Pavao Komlinović and the mystery's unspectacular solution

▣ 125 To solve the mystery of the reason for the right-to-left inscription on Vlatko Vlađević's *stećak*, it is necessary to look more closely at the other example of mirrored text from Bosnia, Pavao Komlinović's slab-shaped gravestone (which was inscribed between 1423 and 1434, cf. Vego 1962: 26; see Fig. 6<sup>8</sup>). The text reads:

outside top	† А СЕ ЛЕЖИ КНЕЗЪ ПАВАУ	† Here lies <i>knez</i> <sup>6</sup> Pavao
outside right	КОМАННОВНЪ НА СВОИ	Komlinović on his
outside bottom	[ПАЕ]МЕННМОИ	[patri]mony
outside left	НА ПРОЗРАЧЦЪ Д ДИИ ВОЕВОДЕ	in Pozračac during the days of <i>vojevoda</i> <sup>6</sup>
inside top	САНДАЛЪ КОИ ГА	Sandalj, whom he <sup>9</sup>
inside right	ПОЧТЕНО И ВЕРНО СЛЪЖАШЕ ДЧРЪМО	honorably and faithfully served; engraved
inside bottom	ДЧРЪМО [sic] НА	engraved [sic] on the
inside left	ПАМЕННМОИ	patrimony

The inscription starts with the cross (in the top left corner of Fig. 6) and then goes clockwise around the slab, first winding along the outer edge, then spiraling inward. Vego (1962: 27) has marked two of the eight lines as “zdesna nalijevo” (“from right to left”) and two as “slijeva ▣ 126 nadesno” (“from left to right”); the other four lines are unmarked. In any case he explicitly notes that “the letters of the inscription are carved sometimes in one and sometimes in the other direction” (“Slova natpisa su urezivana sad s jedne sad s druge strane”, *ibid.*).

However, I see no reason to assume such a chaotic arrangement of the inscription. In my opinion there are two alternative but internally consistent ways to read the text, assuming that the tomb slab lay flat on the grave and that,

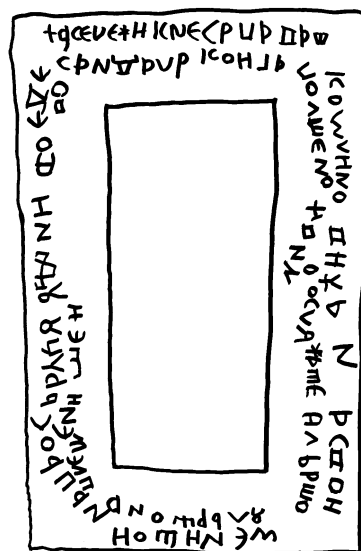


Fig. 6: Pavao Komlinović's gravestone

<sup>8</sup> As the photograph in Vego (1962: 26) is very hard to read because of the furrowed stone, I have made a tracing that shows only the lines of the letters according to Vego's (1962: 27) reading.

<sup>9</sup> This is the interpretation chosen by Vego (1962: 27) in his French translation. The word order would actually rather suggest “who ... served him”, but what we know from other sources about *vojevoda* Sandalj Hranić Kosača (cf. footnote 6), as well as the formulation *u dni* ‘in the days of’ indicate that *koji* ‘who’ has to refer to *knez* Pavao, and *ga* ‘him’ to Sandalj.

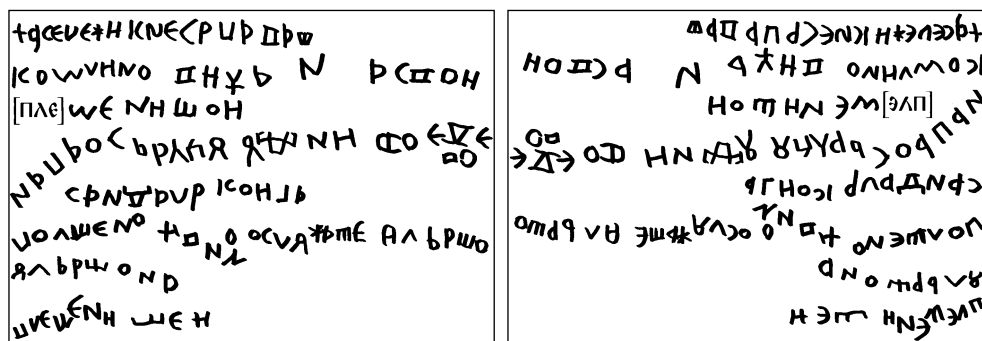


Fig. 7: Left-to-right and right-to-left reconstructions of the inscription

similar to the Humac Tablet (Nosić 1995: 33), one could walk around the slab and read the text in a spiral pattern. Either the inscription was meant to be read from a viewpoint opposite each line, walking clockwise around the grave starting at the foot; in this case, the lines run from left to right. Or one should read from a viewpoint on the side of the slab nearest the current line, also walking around it clockwise but starting at the head end; in this case, all lines run from right to left. Figure 7 demonstrates these two possible interpretations by arranging the lines horizontally. It is obvious that in the left-to-right version many letters are upside down. This is the reason why one is tempted [127](#) to read the lines on the side where one is standing, which makes them run from right to left. However, this reading is not flawless either: The letters ⟨н⟩ and ⟨а⟩ (with one exception) do not point in the direction of writing (i.e. they are not mirrored), and the ⟨р⟩ in line 5 is equally wrong in both versions.

The use of right-to-left or mirrored Cyrillic script here is therefore probably neither due to heresy or schism expressed in the direction of writing, as Mieses (1919: 325) assumes, nor to ‘secret writing’, as Vego (1981: 53) suggests, nor to magic. The text was probably meant to be read from the opposite side of the slab. However, the stonemason chiseled the [128](#) letters into the slab standing (or kneeling) next to the slab on the nearest side. Since he was not very experienced (the placement of the letters does not speak in favor of his skills), he correctly mirrored the letters horizontally but forgot to mirror them also vertically, so that they turned out upside down.

Let us return to Vlatko Vlađević’s *stećak*. It stands upright, so there is no confusion between top and bottom. Apart from that, the letters are almost consistently mirrored horizontally (except for ⟨з⟩, which is unmirrored in all three cases, see 3:2 and 4:3, and the ⟨н⟩ in the word ⟨κνεζа⟩ in 4:3). However, since this is probably the only inscription of this kind written from right to left in Bosnia and the surrounding area, and since it cannot be definitively attributed to any religious community, we can consider Mieses’s claim to be refuted. There might be many reasons why a single text is written ‘backwards’—even nowadays many children who have

only started to learn to write mirror individual letters or whole passages. Our scribe left out letters in several places, later adding “НЕ ОСТА” above the line (4:2), but never correcting the name of the deceased, which was misspelled as “Vlavić” (3:1). It is therefore probably best to explain the mirror writing in Vlatko Vlađević’s case, as well as the upside-down letters in Pavao Komlinović’s case, as the result of the scribes’ incompetence. This brings us back to a conjecture already expressed by Truhelka (1889: 74), which, however, seems to have been forgotten, since it was not even mentioned by Mieses (1919), Mazalić (1941), or Vego (1981):

“Ja sam sebi znao taj pojav samo tako protumačiti, da skulptor natpisa nije umio pisati, da je imao nacrt natpisa na papiru pred sobom, pa ga s obratne strane prenio na kamen te ga uklesao.”

“The only explanation I have been able to find for this phenomenon is that the sculptor of the inscription could not write, that he had a sketch of the inscription on paper before him, but that he placed it upside down on the stone and carved it in.”

This assumption requires only one quite plausible assumption, namely that the stonemason lacked reading skills. According to Ockham’s razor, this makes it preferable to hypotheses about a schismatic 129 change in writing direction, Arabic influence, secret writing, or magic.

## 6. Other cases of ‘schismatic’ changes in writing direction

In the case of the Bulgarian Bogomils, who turned out to be Bosnian Christians, Mieses was wrong. But what about the other examples he cites (Mieses 1919: 325–342)? Is a change in direction of writing for religious reasons otherwise a real phenomenon? If one takes a closer look at his examples, one finds that they are all distorted. I will briefly discuss only his first three examples here.

„Die mohammedanische Bevölkerung der Malediven trat seit ihrer Islamisierung in Widerspruch mit allen ein indisches Alphabet gebrauchenden Völkern des asiatischen Südens und fing ihr bisheriges rechtsläufiges heimatliches Alphabet linksläufig zu schreiben an.“ (Mieses 1919: 325)

“Since their Islamization, the Muslim population of the Maldives has come into conflict with all the peoples of the South of Asia who use an Indic alphabet and has begun to write their previous right-to-left native alphabet from left to right.”

It is true that the Thaana script used for the Divehi language of the Maldives, in contrast to all other Indic scripts, is written from right to left. However, Thaana does not belong to the Indic script family, as it does not derive from the Brahmi script, but is based on the basic principles of the Arabic script (with vowel signs being mandatory, making it a syllabic alphabet; furthermore, it was probably orig-

inally invented as a secret script, as its consonant letters are based on the Arabic numerals 1 to 9).

„Die Aethiopier setzten sich nach ihrer Christianisierung in einen Richtungsgegensatz mit der eigenen Vergangenheit und gaben ihrem bis damals linksläufigen semitischen Alphabet eine rechtsläufige Wendung.“ (Mieses 1919: 325)

“After their Christianization, the Ethiopians took an opposite directional stance to their own past and gave their Semitic alphabet, which until then had been right-to-left, a left-to-right twist.”

In this case, the Ethiopian script does indeed belong to the Semitic script family. However, even its direct predecessor, the ancient South Arabian script, was not necessarily left-to-right originally, but was initially written mainly in *boustrophedon* (alternating lines from left to right and right to left).

▢ 130 The different writing directions in Arabic and Ethiopian are therefore based solely on independent decisions to adopt a uniform direction after predecessors with varying writing directions.<sup>10</sup> Of course, it was certainly practical that the Ethiopian script had the same direction in which the Greek New Testament was written, just as it was probably convenient for Dhivehi speakers to write in the same direction as the Qur’an. But in neither case can there be any question of a conscious change in writing direction to express a religious difference.

▢ 131 The next case is a bit more complex:

„Die buddhistisch gewordenen Mongolen vollzogen einen Bruch mit der bisherigen linksläufigen Richtung ihres ursprünglich den semitischen Syrern entlehnten Schriftsystems und führten eine rechtsläufige Front ein.“ (Mieses 1919: 325)

“The Mongols, who had converted to Buddhism, broke with the previous right-to-left direction of their writing system, which they had originally borrowed from the Semitic Syrians, and introduced a left-to-right direction.”

The Mongolian alphabet is written from top to bottom, column by column, from left to right. The change from the direction of writing commonly used in Semitic scripts (from right to left) already took place during the transition from the predecessor of the Mongolian alphabet, the Sogdian script, to its predecessor, the Old Uyghur script (Coulmas 1996: 471–474, 512). In fact, they simply rotated the page by 90° counterclockwise<sup>11</sup> (Fig. 8) to conform to the top-to-bottom writing direction common in East Asia. However, the columns in Chinese, Japanese, and

<sup>10</sup> The same applies to the better-known case of the Greek alphabet, which is based on the right-to-left Phoenician script (Mieses 1919: 326–327): The oldest Greek texts were still written from left to right, but in the 6th century BCE, *boustrophedon* became the predominant form of writing, and finally, in the 5th century BCE, the current direction of writing was established.

<sup>11</sup> A clockwise rotation would have meant that one would have had to read from bottom to top.

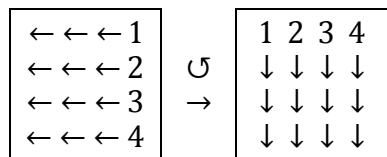


Fig. 8: Rotation from Sogdian to Old Uyghur

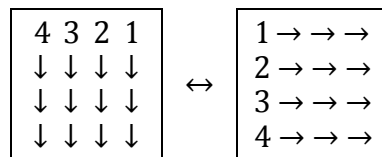


Fig. 9: East Asian writing directions

Korean texts are always arranged from right to left, so that a 90° counterclockwise rotation leads to ‘European’ left-to-right lines<sup>11</sup> (Fig. 9).

Consequently, the Uyghurs did not change the direction of their writing to left-to-right but rather rotated their pages so that they could read in columns from top to bottom (and more easily mix their writing with Chinese), and the arrangement of the columns reflects the original Semitic direction of writing, which they did not abandon.

## 7. Conclusion

Ultimately, therefore, nothing remains of Mieses’s (1919: 325–342) theory about changes in writing direction due to religious schisms. Most of the world’s scripts are written uniformly in one direction because this saves the reader the trouble of first having to determine the direction of writing.<sup>12</sup> Since there are four fundamentally equivalent options for determining a uniform direction of writing (namely those shown in Figs. 8 and 9),<sup>13</sup> it is statistically very likely that different religious communities, if they use different scripts, will also have different directions of writing. And, of course, there are many cases in which a change of religion leads to a change in the writing system. However, there is no evidence anywhere of a religiously motivated change in writing direction alone.

Although this falsification does not add any new content to our knowledge of the linguistics of writing, it does at least provide a negative insight. In a typology

<sup>12</sup> This is usually less of a problem than it seems to us because we are not used to it. It is comparable to the problem of deciding in Serbia or Montenegro whether a sign should be read in Cyrillic or Latin (cf. Bunčić et al. 2016: 243–246): if it makes no sense, try the other script. In addition, in most cases the orientation of the characters helps. In Egyptian hieroglyphs, for example, all anthropoid and zoomorphic characters face against the direction of writing, i.e. toward the reader.

<sup>13</sup> Other writing directions would mean writing from bottom to top, which is virtually unheard of. The only exceptions I know of are the Irish Ogham alphabet and the as yet undeciphered Easter Island script Rongorongo (if it is a script in the full sense of the word). Both are closely linked to the writing material: Ogham was initially carved exclusively on memorial stones, along the vertical edges, starting at the bottom left and, if the edge was not long enough, continuing down the right edge; the classic Rongorongo documents are wooden tablets inscribed in a special type of *boustrophedon*, where the text begins at the bottom left and the tablet was rotated 180° after each line (Horley 2009: 251).

of biscriptality (Bunčić et al. 2016), therefore, in addition to the levels of script (Latin, Cyrillic, Chinese, etc.), glyphic script variants (e.g. Old Cyrillic, Bosančica, Graždanka, etc. within the Cyrillic script), and orthography, the direction of writing does not have to be taken into account as a further independent factor.

Perhaps even more important is the insight into how easily facts can be over-interpreted and that it is always worthwhile to re-examine a claim found in the scientific literature more closely—especially if it fits well into an otherwise sensible concept.

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