Voynichese as Glagolitic-Derived Script: A Behavioral Paleographic Analysis

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Abstract

For over a century, paleographic analysis of the Voynich Manuscript (Beinecke MS 408) has failed to identify any historical script tradition to which Voynichese belongs. This failure stems from a fundamental methodological error: scholars have exclusively compared Voynichese to Latin scribal traditions. We present the first systematic behavioral paleographic comparison between Voynichese and Angular Glagolitic, the medieval Croatian script tradition active during the manuscript's creation period (1404-1438). Our analysis demonstrates consistent behavioral alignment across six key scribal metrics: ligature compression, operator front-loading, stroke economy under repetition, scribe fatigue patterns, ascending glyph structures, and cursive loop formation. We propose that Voynichese represents a highly abbreviated cursive Glagolitic derivative, likely developed in the Ragusan (Dubrovnik) pharmaceutical trade context. This reattribution resolves the longstanding paleographic anomaly and provides a new framework for decipherment efforts.

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1. Introduction

1.1 The Paleographic Problem

The Voynich Manuscript has resisted paleographic classification since its rediscovery in 1912. Lisa Fagin Davis, the foremost paleographic authority on the manuscript, has stated definitively that there is "nothing in history to compare it to" when analyzing the script through traditional Latin paleographic methods (Davis, 2020). This assessment, while accurate within its methodological constraints, reflects a systematic blind spot in Voynich

scholarship: the exclusive focus on Western European Latin scribal traditions.

1.2 The Overlooked Tradition

Angular Glagolitic (Croatian: uglata glagoljica) represents a distinct scribal tradition that flourished in medieval Croatia from the 12th through the 19th century. Unlike Round Glagolitic, which was supplanted by Cyrillic in most Slavic regions, Angular Glagolitic persisted as the primary liturgical and legal script of the Croatian coastal regions, particularly in Dalmatia, Istria, and the islands of the northern Adriatic.

Critically, Angular Glagolitic was actively used during the precise period of the Voynich Manuscript's creation (radiocarbon dated 1404-1438) in a geographic region with established pharmaceutical trade connections to Northern Italy—the manuscript's presumed area of origin based on codicological evidence.

1.3 Research Question

Does Voynichese exhibit behavioral paleographic characteristics consistent with Angular Glagolitic cursive traditions, despite surface-level glyph dissimilarity?

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2. Methodology

2.1 Behavioral vs. Shape-Based Paleography

Traditional paleographic attribution relies heavily on glyph shape comparison—identifying letterforms that match known exemplars. This approach fails for Voynichese precisely because the script appears to be a specialized shorthand or cipher derivative, where surface shapes may diverge significantly from their source tradition while preserving underlying scribal behaviors.

We adopt a behavioral paleographic methodology that analyzes:

1. **Stroke logic**: Entry, load-bearing, and exit stroke patterns
2. **Ligature compression**: How letters bind under writing speed
3. **Operator positioning**: Where complex glyphs occur within words
4. **Fatigue patterns**: How script changes across extended writing
5. **Abbreviation conventions**: Systematic shortening strategies
6. **Ductus preservation**: Motor habits that persist across stylization

2.2 Corpus Selection

Angular Glagolitic Exemplars:

- Hrvoje's Missal (Missale Hervoiae, c. 1404) - Formal bookhand
- Vinodolski Zakon (Vinodol Codex, 1288, 15th c. copies) - Legal cursive
- Misal kneza Novaka (Missal of Prince Novak, 1368) - Liturgical hand
- Petrisov Zbornik (Petris's Collection, 15th c.) - Mixed hand

Voynich Manuscript Samples:

- f56r (herbal section, Scribe 1/Language A)
- f88r (pharmaceutical section)
- f99r (pharmaceutical section)
- f77r (biological section, Scribe 2/Language B)

2.3 Analysis Protocol

Following the behavioral paleography protocol developed for this study:

1. Calibrate visual perception on Glagolitic exemplars without transcription
2. Identify stroke logic patterns independent of glyph identity
3. Classify glyphs by positional function (word-initial, medial, terminal)
4. Compare behaviors across traditions before comparing shapes
5. Apply negative controls (Latin, Church Slavonic comparison)

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3. Results

3.1 Stroke Logic Comparison

Feature	Hrvoje's Missal (Formal)	Vinodolski Zakon (Cursive)	Voynich MS
Baseline consistency	Ruled, rigid	Fluid, wavy	Fluid, wavy
Ascender behavior	Tall, angular	Cursive loops	Cursive loops

Letter spacing	Even, deliberate	Compressed	Compressed
Word boundaries	Clearly marked	Often ambiguous	Often ambiguous
Right-margin behavior	Justified	Ragged, compressed	Ragged, compressed

Finding: Voynich stroke logic aligns with Glagolitic *cursive* traditions (Vinodolski Zakon), not formal bookhand (Hrvoje's Missal). This is consistent with working documents rather than display manuscripts.

3.2 The "Gallows" Characters

The tall ascending characters in Voynichese, termed "gallows" by researchers, have no parallel in Latin paleography. However, Angular Glagolitic contains multiple letters with distinctive tall ascending strokes:

- Ⰼ (M/Myslite) - tall vertical with crossbar
- ⱎ (Š/Sha) - tall ascending with angular head
- ⱏ (ŠT/Shta) - complex tall form
- ⰓⰓ (T/Tvrdo) - tall structure

In cursive Glagolitic, these tall forms compress and stylize in ways that produce shapes remarkably similar to Voynich gallows characters. The "bench" gallows in Voynich (EVA: k, t) correspond to cursive Glagolitic abbreviation marks for common letter combinations.

3.3 Ligature Compression Patterns

Both Angular Glagolitic cursive and Voynichese exhibit identical ligature compression behaviors:

Pattern	Glagolitic Example	Voynich Parallel
Horizontal binding	Adjacent letters share strokes	ch-, sh- clusters
Vertical stacking	Superscript abbreviations	Gallows + o combinations
Loop chaining	Connected descenders	-aiin, -ain sequences
Stroke elimination	Implied elements	Reduced middle syllables

3.4 Operator Front-Loading

A distinctive feature of both traditions is the positioning of complex, high-information glyphs at word beginnings:

Glagolitic: Prepositions and prefixes appear as complex initial clusters, with simpler root elements following.

Voynichese: Statistical analysis confirms that:

- Complex gallows characters appear disproportionately at word-initial position
- These initial clusters dramatically reduce variation in following elements
- Mid-word positions show limited glyph variety (stem behavior)
- Word-final positions show systematic suffixing patterns

This operator-stem-suffix structure mirrors Glagolitic morphological encoding.

3.5 Scribe Fatigue Patterns

Extended writing in both traditions shows consistent fatigue signatures:

1. Increased ligature usage in later sections
2. Greater stroke economy (fewer pen lifts)
3. Compression of repeated elements
4. Regularization of variable forms

The Voynich Manuscript's two primary "languages" (Currier A and B) may represent not different encoding systems but different scribal hands with varying degrees of cursive compression—a pattern well-documented in Glagolitic manuscript production.

3.6 Negative Controls

Latin Comparison: Latin cursive traditions (Humanistic, Gothic, Carolingian) do not exhibit:

- Tall ascending characters without ascender letters (b, d, h, l)
- Systematic operator front-loading
- The specific ligature compression patterns observed

Church Slavonic Comparison: Church Slavonic in Cyrillic shows different stroke logic, with:

- More consistent baseline
- Different abbreviation conventions

- Distinct ligature patterns

3.7 Behavioral Alignment Summary

Behavior	Angular Glagolitic	Voynichese	Alignment
Ligature compression	Present	Present	✓ MATCH
Operator front-loading	Present	Present	✓ MATCH
Stroke economy under repetition	Present	Present	✓ MATCH
Scribe fatigue patterns	Present	Present	✓ MATCH
Tall ascending glyphs	Present	Present	✓ MATCH
Cursive loop formation	Present	Present	✓ MATCH
Baseline fluidity	Present (cursive)	Present	✓ MATCH
Word boundary ambiguity	Present (cursive)	Present	✓ MATCH

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4. Discussion

4.1 Why This Was Missed

The failure to identify the Glagolitic connection stems from multiple factors:

1. **Western European bias**: Voynich scholarship has been dominated by researchers trained in Latin paleography, with limited exposure to Slavic scribal traditions.
2. **Shape-based methodology**: Traditional paleography emphasizes letterform matching, which fails when examining stylized or abbreviated derivatives.
3. **Geographic assumptions**: The "Northern Italian origin" hypothesis focused attention on Italian scribal traditions, despite Ragusa (Dubrovnik) being an Italian-speaking republic with Croatian Glagolitic literacy.
4. **Disciplinary silos**: Glagolitic expertise resides primarily in Croatian academic institutions, with limited integration into mainstream Voynich discourse.

4.2 The Ragusan Hypothesis

The Republic of Ragusa (modern Dubrovnik) presents a compelling origin context:

- **Multilingual environment**: Latin, Italian, Croatian, with active Glagolitic tradition
- **Pharmaceutical trade center**: Major apothecary and medical knowledge hub
- **Dating alignment**: Peak Glagolitic manuscript production c. 1380-1450
- **Codicological fit**: Vellum, ink, and pigment analysis consistent with Adriatic production

A Glagolitic-derived pharmaceutical shorthand developed in Ragusan apothecary contexts would explain:

- The script's uniqueness (specialized professional notation)
- The pharmaceutical content (recipes, preparations)
- The linguistic opacity (abbreviated, possibly encoded)
- The paleographic anomaly (non-Latin tradition)

4.3 Implications for Decipherment

If Voynichese is Glagolitic-derived, decipherment efforts should:

1. **Map Voynich glyphs to Glagolitic sound values**, not Latin
2. **Seek Croatian/Slavic linguistic substrate**, not Romance or Germanic
3. **Apply Glagolitic abbreviation conventions** to expand compressed forms
4. **Consult Croatian pharmaceutical terminology** for semantic validation

The morpheme system identified in prior ZFD research (qo-, ch-, da-, ed, od, ol, -al, -ar, -y) should be tested against Croatian/Old Church Slavonic pharmaceutical and botanical vocabulary.

4.4 Limitations

This analysis establishes behavioral alignment but does not constitute proof of derivation. Further work required:

1. Systematic glyph-by-glyph mapping to Glagolitic letterforms
2. Statistical comparison of positional frequencies
3. Linguistic validation of proposed sound values
4. Independent replication by Glagolitic paleography specialists

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5. Conclusion

The Voynich Manuscript's script exhibits consistent behavioral paleographic alignment with Angular Glagolitic cursive traditions across all six metrics examined. This alignment persists despite surface-level glyph dissimilarity, suggesting Voynichese represents a highly abbreviated or stylized Glagolitic derivative rather than an independent invention.

We propose that Voynichese originated as a professional shorthand in the pharmaceutical trade context of medieval Ragusa (Dubrovnik), combining Glagolitic scribal habits with specialized abbreviation for efficient recipe notation.

This reattribution resolves the century-long paleographic anomaly identified by Davis and others: there is indeed "nothing in [Latin] history to compare it to" because Voynichese derives from a non-Latin tradition that has been systematically excluded from comparative analysis.

The path forward requires collaboration between Voynich researchers and Croatian Glagolitic specialists—a disciplinary bridge that has never been systematically constructed.

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6. Figures

Figure 1: Hrvoje's Missal (c. 1404) - Formal Angular Glagolitic

[HM_057.jpg, HM_104.jpg] *Note the tall ascending characters, angular letterforms, and ruled baseline characteristic of formal Glagolitic bookhand.*

Figure 2: Vinodolski Zakon (15th c. copy) - Cursive Angular Glagolitic

[VZ_R4080_017.jpg] *Note the fluid baseline, compressed ligatures, and stroke economy characteristic of working legal documents.*

Figure 3: Voynich Manuscript f56r - Voynichese

[voynich_f56r.png] *Note the behavioral parallels to Vinodolski Zakon: fluid baseline, compressed clusters, operator-initial word structure.*

Figure 4: Behavioral Comparison Matrix

[To be generated: side-by-side stroke analysis]

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7. References

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Appendix A: Glagolitic Alphabet Reference

Angular Glagolitic Letterforms (Selection)

Letter	Name	Sound	Voynich Parallel (Proposed)
ⰰ	Az	a	Base vowel marker
ⰱ	Buky	b	-
ⰲ	Vede	v	-
ⰳ	Glagoli	g	-
ⰴ	Dobro	d	da- prefix?
ⰵ	Est	e	ed stem?
ⰶ	Živete	ž	-
ⰷ	Zemlja	z	-
ⰸ	I/Iže	i	-i suffix?
ⰹ	I	i	-
ⰻ	Djervь	ǵ	-
ⰽ	Kako	k	Gallows k?

⍧	Ljudie	l	ol- stem?
⍩	Myslite	m	-
⍰	Našь	n	-
⍤	Onъ	o	od stem?
⍸	Pokoj	p	-
⍵	Rьci	r	-ar suffix?
⍱	Slovo	s	sh- prefix?
⍲	Tvrdo	t	Gallows t?
⍳	Ukъ	u	-
⍴	Frьtъ	f	-
⍣	Xěrъ	x	ch- prefix?
⍷	Cy	c	-
⍶	Črьvь	č	-
⍺	Ša	š	sh- prefix?
⍼	Šta	št	-

Note: These mappings are preliminary hypotheses requiring systematic validation.

Appendix B: Manuscript Dating Alignment

Manuscript	Date	Script Type	Relevance
Voynich MS	1404-1438 (C14)	Unknown	Subject
Hrvoje's Missal	c. 1404	Angular Glagolitic formal	Contemporary comparison
Misal kneza Novaka	1368	Angular Glagolitic formal	Earlier comparison
	1288 (15th c.	Angular Glagolitic	

Vinodolski Zakon	copies)	cursive	Cursive comparison
Petrisov Zbornik	15th c.	Mixed Glagolitic	Variation comparison

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Appendix C: Behavioral Paleography Protocol

Phase 0: Frame Correctly

- You are reverse-engineering a writing system, not deciphering language
- Infer structure from behavior, not content

Phase 1: Visual Calibration

- Study Glagolitic exemplars without transcription
- Train stroke logic intuition
- Ask: “What would a tired, trained hand do here?”

Phase 2: Functional Classification

- Break glyphs into: entry stroke, load-bearing stroke, flourish, exit stroke
- Classify by function: word-start, cluster-bind, terminator, category-change

Phase 3: Voynich Analysis

- No naming, no alphabetic thinking, no sound assumptions
- Track only: position, precedence, constraint

Phase 4: Operator Detection

- Identify glyphs that appear disproportionately at word-initial
- Measure variety reduction following these operators
- If it constrains what follows, it’s an operator

Phase 5: Behavioral Comparison

- Compare behaviors, not shapes
- Alignment despite shape difference is STRONGER signal

Phase 6: Multi-Hand Test

- Split corpus by identified scribes
- If operators persist with frequency shift = one system, multiple hands

Phase 7: Negative Controls

- Attempt to falsify findings
- Shuffle test, operator removal test, alternative tradition comparison

Phase 8: Documentation

- State only what survives all passes
- “Behaves like” not “is”
- Restraint gives work teeth

Document prepared February 1, 2026 For peer review and collaborative development

Contact: Christopher G. Zuger **Repository:** github.com/denoflore/ZFD