

WEAPON INSCRIPTIONS IN LATIN SCRIPT FROM THE 9TH–12TH- CENTURY CARPATHIAN BASIN

MÁRK HARAMZA

ABSTRACT: In the history of arms and armours, the study of various symbols, inscriptions or trademarks is of great importance both in determining the provenance and the development of weapons. Numerous weapon inscriptions – usually found on swords – are known from the 9th–12th-century Carpathian Basin. In addition to the prevalent Ingel-variants, we can expect the presence of various texts, letter combinations and letter-like characters in the region. This study provides a brief overview of these weapon inscriptions.

KEYWORDS: Carpathian Basin, sword, spear, inscription, Ingelri

Introduction

This paper was inspired by a stray spearhead¹ placed in the Dunamellék Museum of Révkomárom (today: Komárno, Slovakia) in 1903. The spearhead

1 Inventory number: III 445/OPM.

has a text engraved on the socket. The inscription was reinterpreted as part of the research conducted by Bence Fehér in his collection of runiform script specimens.

Considering the characteristics of the spearhead's form and the socket-blade ratio, the weapon is close to the Petersen G type, suggesting that it probably dates between the mid-10th century and third quarter of the 11th century, but we must definitely assume a wider time range. In his inventory of early medieval spearheads from the Carpathian Basin, Martin Husár² disregarded this stray spearhead. Moreover, it cannot be determined with certainty that this copy was included among the spearheads listed by Alexander Ruttkay, a collector of 9th–14th-century arms and riding equipment discovered in Slovakia.³ In terms of its form, this discovery can be classified in Ruttkay's category IV (more strictly, the IVb which dates starting from the mid-9th century) and Husár's category BE. According to Husár, this category has links both to armoury in the Scandinavian and the Frank territories.⁴ There are examples of spears with angular joggle-joints also among the pole weapons of the Avar Age. The appearance of the weapon in question is slightly similar to the wide triangular blades typically of the Late Avar Age, indicated by Gergely Csiky as a separate category.⁵

In the case of the weapon mentioned, the spine of the blade with a rhomboidal cross-section continues partially on the socket: the four sides of the socket, which becomes narrower near the blade, are decorated with three intact

2 Husár 2014.

3 Ruttkay mentions twelve spears of the Dunamellék Museum in his study, by inventory number: III-12; III-19; III-34 (presumably two under the same number); III-234; III-259; III-260; III-450; III-482; III-539. He mentions two others with no inventory number, and even indicates the absence of an inventory number in the case of one of the two. The description and poor-quality photo of the other piece can roughly be identified as the spearhead in question. If the correspondence is correct, Ruttkay registered the discovery in its earlier state, since which its socket has been dramatically reduced. Ruttkay 1975, pp. 204, 207. Abb. 31:27.

4 Ruttkay 1976, pp. 301–303; Husár 2014, pp. 59–63.

5 The cast foliated belt complement found in the grave suggests the spear with wide triangular blade found in Grave 423 in the Tiszafüred-Majoros cemetery dates to phase I of the Late Avar period. We must also mention the spear in Grave 228 in Zsebes, the transition of which has a similar cross-sectional change as the piece in discussion, although the socket designs differ. Csiky 2009, pp. 98–99; Csiky 2015, pp. 139–141.

and one truncated plate inserts made of a copper alloy. On the two opposite sides, the rows of signs (4+6 engraved signs, from left to right) are roughly identical; Bence Fehér deciphered and interpreted them as follows:

→MA←N→E / ←N→ABIRE / ←N→AME / [←N→]ABIRE

“The inscription is certainly not Germanic runes (Erdélyi must have been misled by the fact that the calligraphy of the E at the end of the word resembles the K^G runes on plate 2, so the text resembles the characteristic [fuþa]rkg abc inscription initials), but it is not even runiform script, it is a meaningless (magical?) inscription with stylised Latin script. The letter N is inverted everywhere, in two cases it even has an additional vertical hasta; the letter A appears in two forms (with an upper serif and a fragmented midline).”⁶

Latin inscription on spearheads was by no means common practice in early medieval Europe, and the example above is a unique phenomenon in the region. However, inscriptions on swords were more common and are not unknown in the Carpathian Basin. Research on the sword inscriptions of the period studied has noticed several trends that can help interpret the inscription on the above-mentioned spearhead.

Sword inscriptions

Even the Celts were known to mark their swords by name,⁷ but most inscriptions date in the 8th to 13th centuries. Examining them by weapon type, in most cases we see inscriptions on sword blades.

Inscriptions were made either by plain engraving or metal inserts. Damascening and inserts of non-ferrous metals (copper) and “black metals”

6 Fehér 2020, No. 126. But we must note that there are several copies of spears with runic inscription from the times of migrations in Europe. One of the most representative of these is the copy in Follingbo (Swedish History Museum, inventory number 15928), which was also featured in the Vikings: Lives Beyond the Legend exhibition of the Royal BC Museum in 2014.

7 Davidson 1988, pp. 42–43.

(iron-coal alloys) are both characteristic. In the latter case, the pre-shaped letters were fixed to the blade material by welding in fire. Metal inserts were homogeneous (in most cases, ferrophosphorus for contrast) or ornamentally forge-welded (damascened).⁸ A general trend we can notice was that the finer inscriptions, craftsmen's signatures and other ornamental patterns on the blade gradually eliminated fire-welded metal inserts, a malleable kind of shaping which gave way to softer, precious metals and non-ferrous metals that are easier to handle. As the patterns grew more intricate, in the late Middle Ages milling became increasingly important in addition to engraving and insertion.⁹

The most well-known inscription is VLFBERHT and its variants. Most frequently, this inscription is interpreted as a Frankish proper name and it is assumed that it initially stood for the name of the sword-maker or workshop. Based on how it spread and the etymology of the name, it is commonly believed to originate from the Lower Rhine region, but most finds were discovered in Scandinavian territories.¹⁰ Inscription variants with Ingel in the root (most commonly INGELRII, INGELRED) are also believed to designate the maker. Their dating is unclear, but most experts believe they were made until after the Vlfberht blades, up to the late 12th century.¹¹ Anders Lorange suggested the inscription might originate in England, based on the homonymous treasurer of Ethelred II (978–1016).¹² In this case, the inscription type can be assumed to date as early as the last quarter of the 10th century. In the case of most of the inscriptions with an Ulf- or Ingel- root, the text is most often paired with a geometrical pattern on the other side of the blade. Other frequent inscriptions were GICELIN and CIGELIN, and we can also find a smaller number of blades

8 Haramza 2017, pp. 105–106.

9 Milling was a frequently used method for bringing out patterns on composite or hypereutectoid (Wootz) steel arms, but separately made patterns became popular ornaments on larger steel objects (shields and armour) only starting from the late 15th century and early 16th century. Thiele & Haramza 2014, pp. 145–160; Halmágyi & Riedel 1986, pp. 63–64.

10 In her 2008 study, Anne Stalsberg counted 170 specimens of this type. Stalsberg 2008, pp. 89–118; cf. Haramza 2017, pp. 103–117.

11 Idem, p. 140; cf. Hoffmeyer 1954, pp. 112–113.

12 Lorange 1889, p. 16.

with the inscriptions LEUTLRIT and BENNO.¹³ Besides the Latin-type sword inscriptions, the inscription “Людота коваль” occurred in Rus territories.¹⁴

Interpreting some inscriptions as names makes sense considering the inscription ME FECIT on the other side of the blade¹⁵ or after the name, as its continuation¹⁶ (or abbreviated or fragmented versions of this: FECIT, FIT). There are examples of Christian texts as well, such as the words of prayer *in nomine Domini* and *amen*. The text “in the name of God” could help understand the weapon inscription both in terms of its making and its use.

In addition to the above, letterlike and geometrical signs on the back side were frequent as well.¹⁷ The most probable explanations for the stylised letters and changed letter order were related to the development of signatures and ornamental techniques, the hierarchic differences between makers or users, or the spread of some inscription types by copying or perhaps even forgery.¹⁸

Inscription types in the Carpathian Basin

In the Carpathian Basin, as far as we know, blades with inscriptions with an Ingel-root were most frequent. The swords discovered in 1962 in Érd-Dunameder and in 1971 in Abaszéplak (Krásna nad Hornádom) near Kassa (Košice) bear the inscription INGELRII.¹⁹ This alone indicates that it took some time for the inscription to be made on the blades, since based on its fittings, the one in Abaszéplak is dated to the second half of the 10th century²⁰ – its decorative

13 Moilanen 2015, pp. 12, 143, 324.

14 Of the Ljudota swords, the most famous one was the weapon found near Hvoshecheve in Ukraine, on which Anatoly Kirpichnikov discovered a Cyrillic inscription. Kirpicsnyikov 1966, pp. 41–44; Androshchuk 2003, pp. 15–25.

15 Rutt kay 1976, p. 280.

16 +GICELINMEFECIT+, +NZOMEFECIT+, +BENOMEFECIT+, +INNOMEFECIT+ Such was the finding in Rovaniemi. Moilanen 2015, pp. 142–150.

17 Idem, pp. 151–171.

18 Haramza 2017, pp. 106–110; cf. Moilanen 2017, pp. 9–12, 30–33; Medgyesi 2012, pp. 59–63.

19 Kovács 1995, pp. 159, 160, photo 5.2, pp. 161, 165, photo 8.3, pp. 166, 168, photo 10.5, pp. 175–176; cf. Rutt kay 1975, p. 152. Nr. 79, p. 153. Abb. 8, p. 155. Abb. 9; Kalmár 1961, p. 115.

20 At the same time, we must mention that ceramics dated to the 12th to 13th century and

technique resembling the sword of the “Rus hero” found in Székesfehérvár-Bikasziget – while according to Kalmár the one from Érd definitely dates later, to the second half of the 11th century. According to Ruttkay, the inscription of the Abaszéplak sword begins with a + sign.

Ruttkay also mentions a sword with the inscription +NGEILRICENS in the Dunamellék Museum and a sword fragment from Miava with the inscription INGELRII, dating both of them around the 11th or 12th century, and believed the inscriptions to be forge-welded ornaments.²¹ If the assumption is correct, these are relatively late examples of damascening.

Another later sword is the one discovered in the bed of the Sava at Bosanska-Gradiška, which, according to communication by János Kalmár in 1959, together with another sword, was among the “*artworks to be handed over to Yugoslavia under the peace treaties*”. Its inscription is commonly identified as SINIGELRINIS or SINGELRINIS and dates probably around the 11th or 12th century.²² A closer parallel is one of the auctioned items of the Frank Unrath collection, erroneously dated to around the mid-10th century and mid-11th century. The SINGELRINIS variant between cross signs appears on this sword as well.²³ Considering that the geometrical signs on the back side of the sword blade of Bosanska-Gradiška are also framed by S signs, it may well be that they are merely closing signs of the inscription on the front side too. The use of the

coins associated with István IV (1163–1164) were also found at this site. Ruttkay 1975, p. 152. No. 79. But any associations with the weapon come with reservations, considering the circumstances of the discovery.

- 21 Idem, p. 160. Nr. 103, p. 151. Abb. 7.4, p. 161, Abb. 10:2–3, p. 198. Abb. 25:4, p. 199. Ruttkay also suggested that the “CENS” end of the inscription variant from Révkomárom (Komárno, Slovakia) could be an abbreviation of the word *census* and designate the quality of the sword. Ruttkay 1976, p. 283.
- 22 National Museum of Bosnia (Sarajevo), inventory number: 6894. Kalmár associates the inscription with the military campaign of Saint László for no particular reason. Kalmár 1959, pp. 189–191; cf. Kovács 1995, pp. 159, 166.
- 23 <https://www2.bonhams.com/auctions/20801/lot/188/> Another auctioned item with an Ingel inscription (side “A”: +INGELRI+ side “B”: +PREBM+): <https://www2.bonhams.com/auctions/21639/lot/218/> (accessed on: 03.02.2020) SINGELRINIS swords have blades with similar sizes; the auctioned copy is 895 mm, while the Bosanska-Gradiška one is 835 mm (according to more recent measurements by Marko Aleksić, 830 mm). Kalmár 1959, p. 189; Aleksić 2007, p. 172. Nr. 297.

S sign and cross was not rare in the later centuries, either, as we can notice it in the “S+S” inscription of a blade discovered at an unknown place.²⁴

It is interesting to note that in three of the five cases, the sword with an Ingel-root inscription was found either in a riverbed or nearby.²⁵ Although the low occurrence cannot justify any general conclusions, it is certain that swords with this inscription type were frequently found in river areas.²⁶ Husár draws attention to the same detail in the case of spears dated to around the 5th to 11th centuries, in the Western part of the Carpathian Basin. In his opinion, the spears may have ended up in the river for ritualistic reasons, showing several examples of how pagan sacrificial rites survived up to the 11th century.²⁷

Due to its contemporaneous “use”, of the VLFBERHT inscription blades, the sword kept in the Saint Vitus Cathedral in Prague and attributed to István I (Saint Stephen) may be associated with the region. Since the disclosure by German canon Franz Bock in 1870,²⁸ many researchers have studied the weapon more closely. In his report written in 1890, Ingwald Undset expressed theories and observations relating to the origin of the sword (Scandinavian territory, Lower Rhine region) and its technology (a “rammed” blade, that is, with a forge-welded decoration).²⁹ In the memorial book written on the 900th anniversary of Saint Stephen’s death, Nándor Fettich examined the decorative

24 HNM, inventory number: 53.127. Another sword worthy of mention is the one found in the Köröstarcsa-Ürmös area, also in a riverbed (Kettős-Körös) dated around the 13th–14th century, whose blade has an S sign in concentric circles. Medgyesi 2012, pp. 57–58, 77–82, photos 6–8, 10–11.

25 According to Ruttkay, the weapon was found 150 m from the current bed of the Hernád. He also mentions another sword that was destroyed. The stray weapon found in Miava was not a riverside find: professor M. Gálik received it from a student who lived in one of the farms on the Miava hills (presumably the sword was found in the same region). We know even less about the sword with an inscription in the Dunamellék Museum: the weapon was in an older collection of the museum, seriously damaged in the fire of 1944, and the inventory book was also lost in the fire. Ruttkay 1975, p. 152, Nr. 79, p. 160, Nr. 130; p. 199.

26 The sword with an INGELRED inscription was found in the Isac at Nantes, while the one with the INGELRII inscription was discovered in the Thames.

27 Nevertheless, most sources mention wells and springs as places of rituals. Husár 2016, pp. 13–18.

28 Bock 1870, p. 14.

29 Undset 1890, pp. 164–166; Kovács 2003, pp. 342–345.

motifs of the Prague sword in more detail,³⁰ while Kornél Bakay paid more attention, among others, to a linguistic interpretation of the inscription.³¹

It is also important to note the symbols that are either too damaged to be properly read, or, as letterlike signs or imitations of letters, no longer convey the meaning of the original inscription, and differ from the original version for the reasons mentioned (copying, forgery, stylistic development).

László Kovács mentions other blades with inserts, such as the piece found in Malomszeg or the one in Detva. One side of the blade of the weapon found in Malomszeg has a bronze insert, while the other has an insert that can be read as an inscription fragment or letterlike back-side sign: ...IIS...SI. Erwin Gáll read the inscription to be in the order “I–S–I reverse S and I–I”.³² Regarding the sword in Detva, Alexander Ruttkay comments that a damascened intarsia with a torsional pattern can be seen on the blade: an X sign between two opposing horseshoe shapes, and on the other side, a cross with equal sized arms and a circle.³³ But similar to the later sword of Köröstarcsa, this may be part of the craftsman’s signature.

Back to the spear of Komárom

It follows from the above that most inscriptions are related to content associated with the weapon’s maker, the making or its owner,³⁴ but religious words and symbols were frequently used as well. Therefore, we can assume the inscription on the Komárom spear has a similar content. The technique differs from sword

30 Fettich 1938, pp. 475–516.

31 In connection with his theory, Undset illustrated the use of European (Frank) workshop traditions on Scandinavian swords by dividing the inscription into two: Ulf (Scandinavian) and Behrt (Frank). Bakay 1967, pp. 167–170.

32 Gáll also draws attention to the fact that Malomfalva was erroneously regarded as the discovery site for a long time, as Sándor Ferenczi noted the name Malomszeg when it was found. Kovács 1995, p. 163. photo 7.5, p. 169; cf. Gáll 2013, p. 317.

33 Kovács 1995, p. 173. photo 13.2; p. 179; cf. Ruttkay 1975, p. 136, Abb. 2.4, Nr. 29, p. 137, Abb. 3.1; Haramza 2017, p. 110, no. 35.

34 The owner of the weapon (Rane) and its maker (Botfus) are assumed in the runic inscription of the Follingbo spear. <https://royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/assets/Media-Images-We-Call-Them-Vikings-Final.pdf> (accessed on: 20.02.2020).

blades; the inscription is not inserted directly in the blade material, but on a separate medium, on copper plates.

Considering the style of the inscription – extra notch, stylised, changed letter order –, a direct interpretation based on the visual order (such as a form of the verb “abeo”) is not justified. Based on the above, the most probable explanation is that the letters of the prayer inscription AMEN were copied with no meaning and original order, that is, the stylised letters or letterlike symbols were marked. But the original, if there was any, of the fragment “N-ABIRE” is unknown. It cannot be excluded that a name was behind these letters, or perhaps a prayer or religious text relating to *amen*. But the weapon inscriptions of the probable period cannot answer this question.

REFERENCES

- Aleksić, M. (2007): *Mediaeval Swords from Southeastern Europe. Material from 12th to 15th century.* Dedraplast, Belgrade.
- Androshchuk, F. (2003): The Ljudota Sword? An Episode of Contacts Between Britain and Scandinavia in the Late Viking Age. *Ruthenica*, 2. pp. 15–25.
- Bakay, K. (1967): Archäologische Studien zur Frage der ungarischen Staatsgründung. *ActaArchHung*, 19. pp. 105–174.
- Bock, F. (1870): Der Schatz von St. Veit in Prag. *Mittheilungen der K. K. Central-Commission zur Erforschung und Erhaltung der Baudenkmale*, 15. pp. 13–28.
- Csiky, G. (2009): *Az avar kori szúró- és vágófegyverek.* Doctoral dissertation, Eötvös Loránd University Faculty of Humanities, Budapest.
- Csiky, G. (2015): *Avar-Age Polearms and Edged Weapons. Classification, Typology, Chronology and Technology.* Brill, Leiden–Boston.
- Davidson, H.E. (1988): *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England.* Boydell Press, New York.
- Fehér, B. (2020): *A Kárpát-medencei rovasírásos emlékek gyűjteménye I.* MKI, Budapest.
- Fettich, N. (1938): A prágai Szent István kard régészeti megvilágításban. In: Serédi, J. (ed.): *Emlékkönyv Szent István király halálának kilencszázadik évfordulóján.* Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, 1938. 475–516.
- Gáll, E. (2013): *Az Erdélyi-medence, a Partium és a Bánság 10–11. századi temetői.* University of Szeged Department of Archaeology, Szeged.
- Halmágyi, Sz. & Riedel, L. (1986): *Régi fegyverekről.* Műszaki Könyvkiadó, Budapest.
- Haramza, M. (2017): VLFBERHT – egy kardfelirat eredete és technológiája. *Micae Mediaevales*, 6. pp. 103–117.
- Hoffmeyer, A.B. (1954): *Middelalderens tveæggede sværd I.* Tøjhusmuseet, København.
- Husár, M. (2014): *Žrdovo-bodné zbrane vcasného stredoveku v Karpatskej kotline 1. diel. Typológia a jej vyhodnotenie.* Univerzita Konštantína Filozofa v Nitre, Nitra.

- Husár, M. (2016): Finds of Early Medieval Thrusting Pole Arms from Watery Locations of the Carpathian Basin. *Acta Militaria Mediaevalia*, 12. pp. 7–23.
- Kalmár, J. (1959): Két középkori kardról. *ArchÉrt*, 86. pp. 189–191.
- Kalmár, J. (1961): Ingelri kard a történeti múzeumban. *ArchÉrt*, 88. p. 115.
- Kirpicsnyikov (1966): Анатолий Николаевич Кирпичников: Древнерусское оружие I. *Советская Археология*, Академия Наук СССР, Институт Археологии, Москва – Ленинград.
- Kovács, L. (1994/95): A Kárpát-medence kétélű kardjai a 10. század 2. feléből. *CommArchHung*, pp. 153–189.
- Kovács, L. (2003): Kovács László: Viselet, fegyverek. In: Kristó, Gy. (ed.): *Háborúk és hadviseelés az Árpádok korában*. Szukits Könyvkiadó, Szeged, pp. 284–391, Figures 10–30.
- Lorange, A. (1889): Den yngre jernalders sværd. Et Bidrag til Vikingetidens Historie og Teknologi. Bergens Museum, Bergen.
- Medgyesi, P. (2012): 13–14. századi kétélű kard Köröstarcsa-Ürmös-hátról, a Kettős-Körös medréből. *A Békés Megyei Múzeumok Közleményei*, 35. pp. 57–82.
- Moilanen, M. (2015): Marks of Fire, Value and Faith. Swords with Ferrous Inlays in Finland during the Late Iron Age (ca. 700–1200 AD). *Turku Suomen Keskiajan Arkeologian Seura*, Turku, 2015. (*Archaeologia Medii Aevi Finlandiae* 21).
- Moilanen, M. (2017): Illiterate Imitations and Qualified Commodities: Letter-Like Marks in Finnish Early Medieval Sword Blades. *Acta Militaria Mediaevalia* 13. pp. 7–36.
- Ruttkay, A. (1975): Waffen und Reiterausrüstung des 9. bis zur ersten Hälfte des 14. Jahrhunderts in der Slowakei (I). *SlovArch*, 23/1. pp. 119–216.
- Ruttkay, A. (1976): Waffen und Reiterausrüstung des 9. bis zur ersten Hälfte des 14. Jahrhunderts in der Slowakei (II). *SlovArch*, 24/2. pp. 245–395.
- Stalsberg, A. (2008): Herstellung und Verbreitung der Vlfberht-Schwertklingen. Eine Neubewertung. *Zeitschrift für Archäologie des Mittelalters*, 36/1. pp. 89–118.
- Thiele, Á. & Haramza, M. (2014) A középkori damaszkolt pengék archaeometallurgiája és mechanikai tulajdonságai – fegyvertörténeti kitekintés. *Hadtörténelmi közlemények*, 127. pp. 145–160.
- Undset, I. (1890): Egy túróczmegyei leletről. *ArchÉrt*, 10. pp. 164–166.

