

National Antiquities: Genealogies, Hagiographies, Holy Objects

REES 1174, cross-list HIST 0723, Benjamin Franklin Seminar
Instructor: Prof. Julia Verkholtantsev (Russian and East European Studies)

Course Description and Objectives

Human societies have always sought to understand their origins, the reasons behind their customs, the foundations of their social institutions and religious beliefs, and the justification for their power structures. To achieve this, they have developed creation myths and origin stories for their communities, situating themselves within the natural and human worlds' past and present. The newly Christianized kingdoms of medieval Europe faced the challenge of finding their place within the universal Providential history. They wove their histories into the narratives they knew from the authoritative sources of the time—biblical genealogies and heroic tales inherited from the poets of classical antiquity. The deeds and virtues of saintly kings and church hierarchs provided continuity to these historical narratives, mapping them onto a sacred vision of time and space.

In the 19th century, interest in medieval antiquity as a source of inspiration for political and cultural renewal led to both a critical study of evidence and the reinterpretation and repurposing of this evidence in light of a new political concept: the nation.

This seminar will focus on several Central, Eastern, and Southeast European nations, examining three categories of "national antiquities" that have played a significant role in shaping their modern nationalisms: (1) stories of ethnogenesis (so-called *origo gentis*), which narrate and explain the origins and genealogies of peoples and states as recorded in medieval and early modern chronicles; (2) narratives about holy figures regarded as national patron saints; and (3) material objects of sacred significance—manuscripts, religious ceremonial objects, crowns, and icons—that serve as symbols of political, cultural, and national identities.

Approach

Our approach will be twofold: On the one hand, we will read medieval sources and explore what they reveal about the mindsets of the authors and societies that produced them. We will consider how knowledge of the past helped medieval societies legitimize the present and provide models for the future. On the other hand, we will examine how medieval narratives and artifacts have been interpreted and repurposed in modern times—first during the "Romantic" stage of national awakening, then in the post-imperial era of independent nation-states, and finally in the post-Soviet context of a reimagined Europe. We will investigate how studying nationalist mentalities enhances our understanding of how the past is represented and repurposed in both scholarship and politics.

Objectives

In this course, students will:

- Gain familiarity with and experience in interpreting a variety of premodern literary texts (historiographic, hagiographic, and popular narratives) as well as various types of material artifacts.
- Develop an appreciation for specific methodological approaches necessary for working with historical texts, including identifying their audience, uses, limitations, and biases.
- Cultivate the skills required to understand and engage with academic studies by analyzing the evidence and arguments presented by scholars.
- Build skills in crafting analytical questions and forming arguments through class discussions and written assignments.
- Enhance their understanding of the mechanisms of historical and social change.
- Develop an understanding of how national traditions are created and "invented," and how these traditions contribute to and shape collective identities and politics.

Course Materials

In most units, the readings are organized in a similar pattern and include (1) primary sources, (2) background readings that provide historical and methodological context, (3) case studies of how a premodern narrative or artifact under examination has been reinterpreted and repurposed in modern (i.e., post-1800) political and cultural contexts.

All reading materials are available in electronic format on Canvas.

Coursework at a Glance

- ~~~ Consistent attendance, active participation in class discussions and home preparation
- ~~~ Course materials include textbooks, scholarly articles, primary sources in translation, maps and video.
- ~~~ Five take-home, open book quizzes that test the knowledge of reading assignments (letter grade)
- ~~~ Final open book, take-home test or research paper (letter grade)
- ~~~ Two response papers on home readings and their introduction in class: outline of main arguments and agenda for discussion (letter grade)
- ~~~ Creation of a historical profile for one nation-state (independent work, individual assignment, pass/fail)
- ~~~ End-of-the-course written reflection on course takeaways (2 pages, pass/fail)

Schedule of Topics

Week 1 (1/15)

Basic Concepts and Approaches to Nationalism.
Regions of Europe: What is “Central” (East-Central), “Eastern” and “Western” Europe?

Week 2 (1/27)

History and nationalism. Ethno-Symbolism

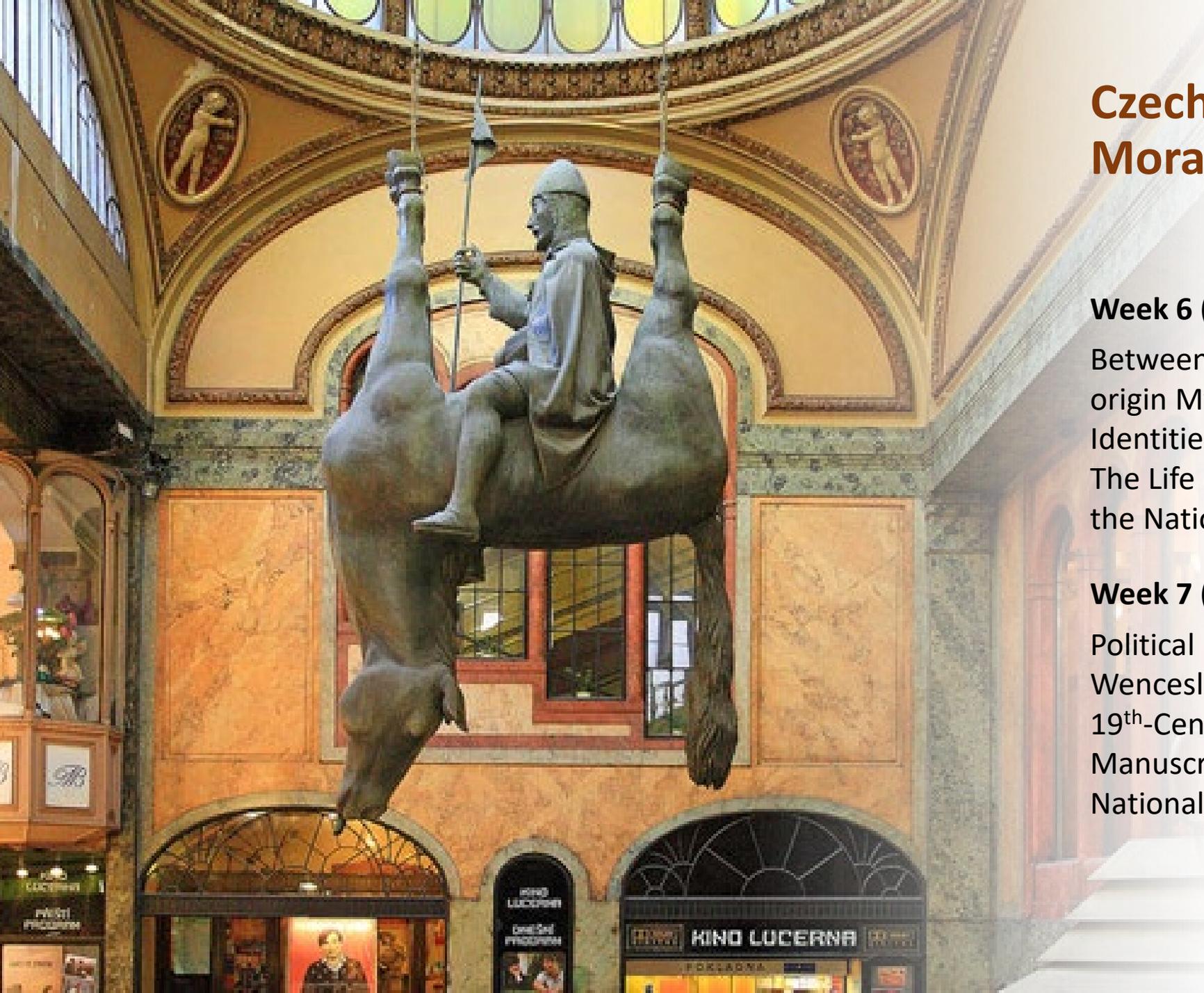
Week 3 (2/3)

Beginnings of National History Writing. Myth and History. Origin Stories of Ethnogenesis.

Week 4 (2/10)

Medieval Origins of Central and Eastern Europe.
Nations without States, States without Nations





Czechia: Bohemia and Moravia

Week 6 (2/24)

Between Myth and History: Foundational origin Myths & Legends and Czech National Identities

The Life of St. Wenceslas and the “Father of the Nation” Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV

Week 7 (3/3)

Political Nostalgia: the Sword and Army of St. Wenceslas, the Knights of Blanik

19th-Century National Revival: Czech Manuscript Forgeries, Art, National Theater National Myths



Hungary

Week 8 (3/17)

The Pagan and Christian Past of Hungary as glorious beginnings: Attila the Hun and the Scythian Identity

Week 9 (3/24)

The King of Hungary St. Stephen, the Hungarian Holy Crown as a National and Political Symbol. The Politics of Royal Sainthood Today and St. Stephen's Right Hand. *István, a király* (rock opera)

Poland

Week 10 (3/31)

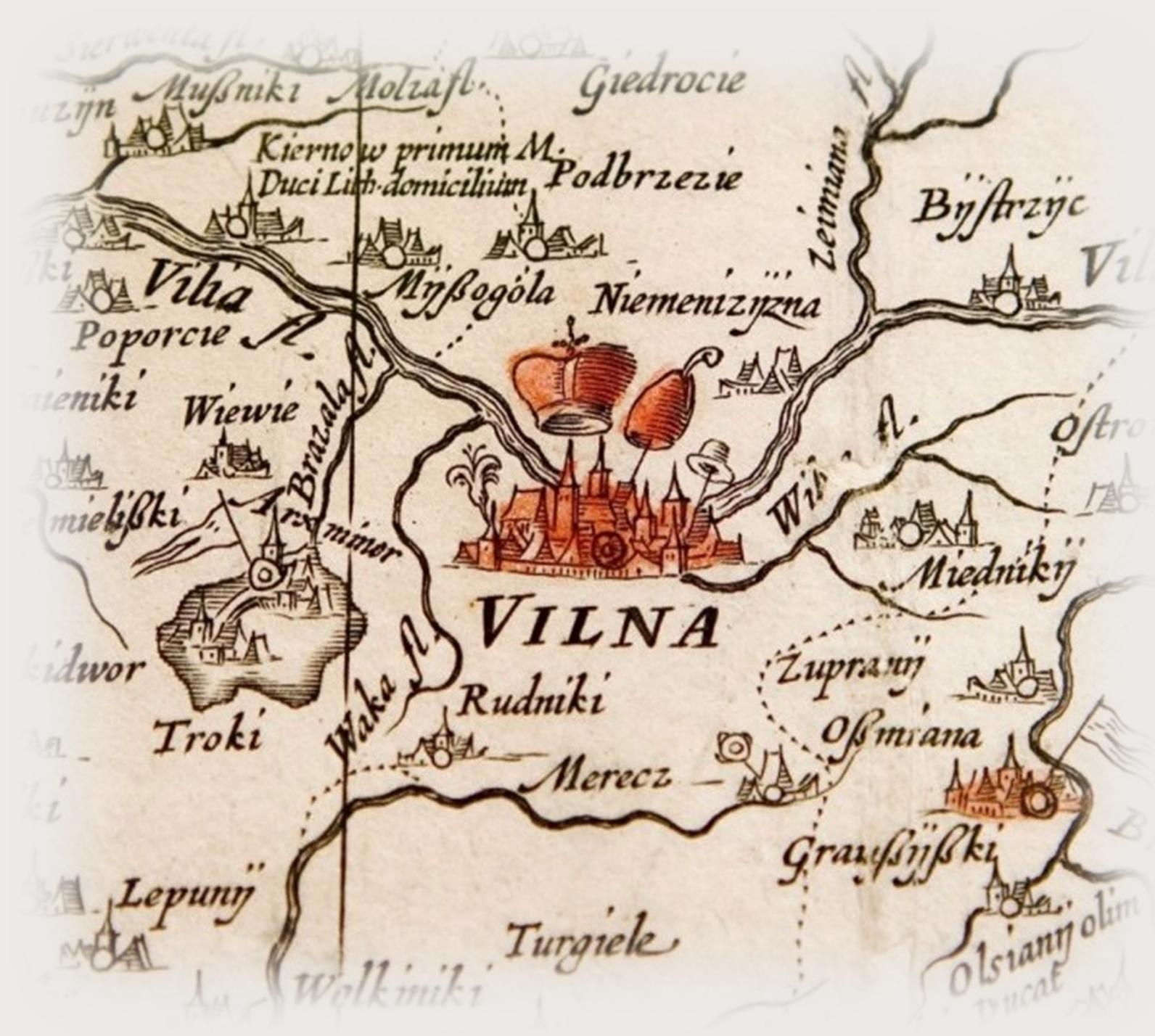
A New Chosen People? Gallus Anonymus's Narrative about Poland and its Rulers.

Myths of Origin in Vincent's Chronicle

The Saints in Polish History.

Polish National Mythology and Messianism.
The miracleworking Czestochowa Icon of the Most Holy Mother of God.





Rus and Grand Duchy of Lithuania: Lithuania, Ukraine and Belarus

Week 12 (4/14)

“A Vanished Kingdom” and the Making of Modern Lithuania, Ukraine and Belarus

Myths and Legends: Varangians and Princess Olga (Rus)

“Tale of Duke Polemon” and the Roman Origins of Lithuania

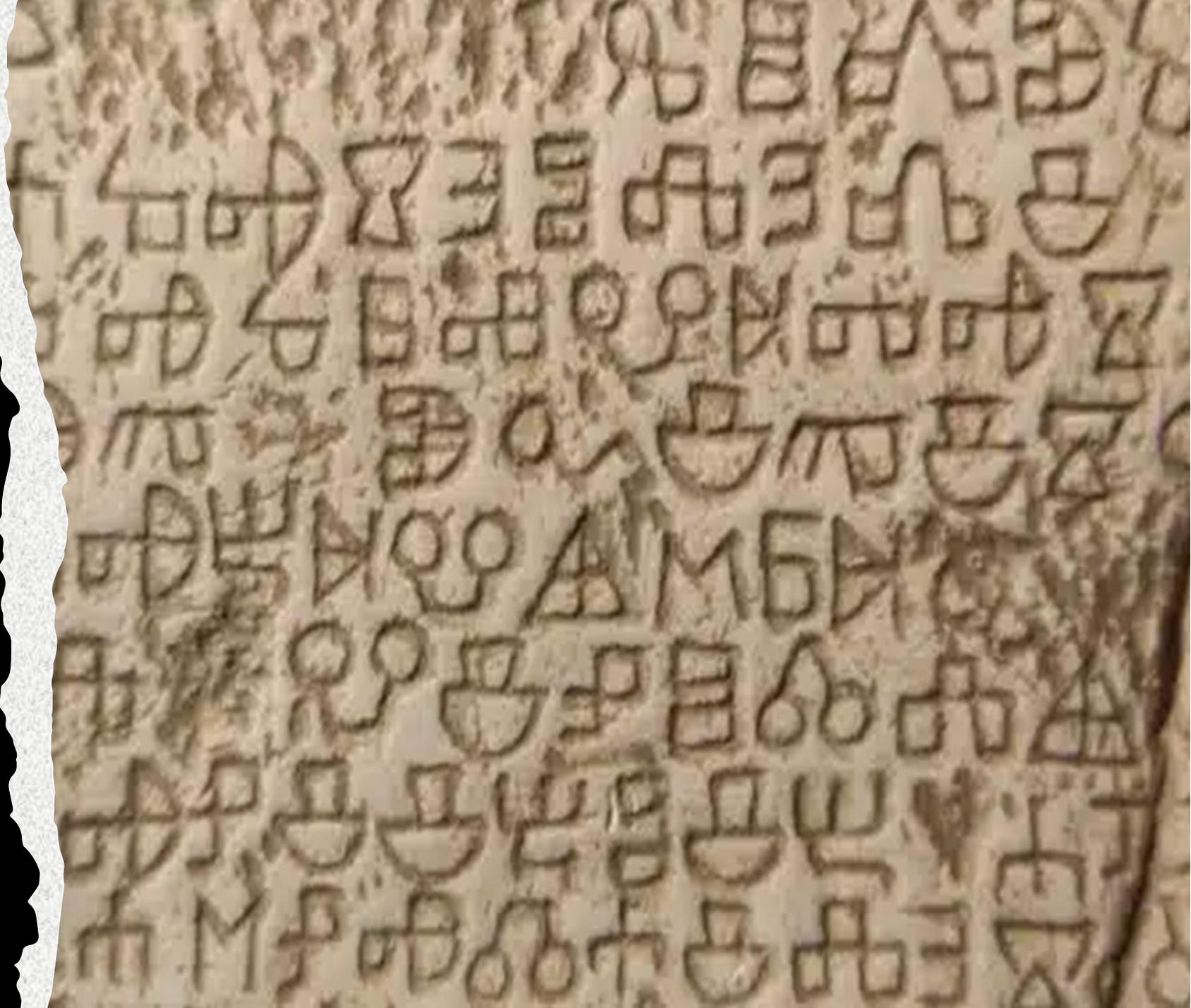
Croatia

Week 13 (4/21)

Baptismal Font of the Croats

Glagolitic Script

Middle Ages in Modern Croatia
and Croatian National Identity





Review

Week 14 (4/28) Comparing National Myths and Drawing Conclusions

