

From the Trenches

LATE-BREAKING NEWS AND NOTES FROM THE WORLD OF ARCHAEOLOGY

Headline

In 1819, Cherokee silversmith George Gist—better known as Sequoyah—completed work on the Cherokee syllabary, a written script in which each character represents a syllable. By 1825, most Cherokee had adopted the system and Sequoyah (ᏍᏏᏉᏯ in Cherokee) was hailed as a folk hero for inventing a purely indigenous system of writing. Now University of Cincinnati

archaeologist Kenneth Tankersley has discovered that Cherokee characters engraved alongside petroglyphs in a southeastern Kentucky cave are the earliest known examples of Sequoyah's syllabary, dating back to 1818, or perhaps even earlier.



Tankersley, a member of the Cherokee Nation and Piqua Shawnee tribes, found the characters in a cave sacred to Native Americans as the burial place of Red Bird, a prominent Cherokee chief who was tomahawked to death in 1796 by two white men in a fur trading dispute. Red Bird was known to have created some of the petroglyphs in the cave, which include abstract ancient symbols as well as glyphs representing bears, bats, deer, and birds.

Sequoyah had relatives who lived near the cave and he taught the syllabary to Cherokee boys studying at a local school called the Choctaw Academy. "It's likely that Sequoyah would have visited the cave at some



The earliest writing in the system developed by the Cherokee Sequoyah, left, has been found in a Kentucky cave.

point to pay respects to Red Bird," says

Tankersley. "We also know that he visited caves for inspiration while he was working on his syllabary, and that he incorporated rock-art motifs into the system."

Tankersley has identified 15 characters in the cave—R O' M J G ᵂ H ᵂ i O K ᵂ O F Θ—accompanied by a date carved in the same hand that could be 1818 or 1808. "The characters don't spell any words—they read almost like ABCs" says Tankersley, who is also intrigued by the ambiguous date.

Accounts of Sequoyah's life agree that he started working intensely on the syllabary sometime around 1809. If the characters in Red Bird's cave date to 1808, there is only one person who could have created

them.

"My gut tells me Sequoyah left these characters in the cave," says Tankersley. "But without a time machine, that's archaeofantasy. If it wasn't him, then it was someone Sequoyah personally taught at the Choctaw Academy, and who was practicing drawing them out just as we would practice our ABCs. Regardless, the person is leaving these characters alongside traditional symbols in a sacred place. For Cherokee, this syllabary was sacred too."

Tankersley points out that it's not surprising to find examples of Sequoyah's syllabary alongside petroglyphs. "In 1818 Cherokee were adopting the trappings of European life, living in three-story buildings, tending orchards, and eating off of china, but they were still visiting sacred places like Red Bird's cave and practicing their way of life," he says. "It's important to remember that Native American history and archaeology don't disappear after Europeans arrive." —ERIC A. POWELL