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To cite this article: M. C. Benitan (2018): 'Rain of God's Letters' – Glagolitic Alphabet as a Mystical Tool?, *Medieval Mystical Theology*, DOI: [10.1080/20465726.2018.1472413](https://doi.org/10.1080/20465726.2018.1472413)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/20465726.2018.1472413>



Published online: 02 Jun 2018.



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## 'Rain of God's Letters' – Glagolitic Alphabet as a Mystical Tool?

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### ABSTRACT

The Glagolitic alphabet was intended as a political and religious tool for the Slavs in the ninth century. This paper argues that despite its quick suppression, Glagolitic – arguably composed by Constantine The Philosopher (a brother of Methodius) from Thessaloniki – could have been a mystical tool. The relevant historical context and hagiographical material are explored to establish the alphabet's origins. Uspenskij's distinction regarding the *palaeographic* and *ideographic* origins of scripts is then followed. A short survey of the most relevant graphic features of some letters, their arrangement in the alphabet, their names, and their possible origins is accompanied by a more in-depth discussion of some key graphemes and their mystical potential. Tschernochvostoff's theory of Glagolitic being woven upon three basic Christian symbols is elaborated on and expanded. Finally, the stunning (acrophonic) naming of the letters is shown as coding comprehensible Christian, and arguably mystical, messages in Proto-Slavic.

### KEYWORDS

Glagolitic; alphabet; mystical; Constantine; Methodius; Proglas

On a global scale, the year 863 AD was rather eventful. Patriarch Photios I of Constantinople was excommunicated at the Lateran synod in Rome, and so the wheels of the Great Schism between the Christian East and West were set in motion quite irrevocably. In Britain, the Northumbrians squabbled for royal power amid the Great Heathen Army's movements between York and Mercia. In the East, the Muslim forces broke in as far as the Black Sea, where they in turn suffered a crushing defeat. More importantly for our focus, however, it was one of the most significant years for all Slavs – and not just those then inhabiting the fragile kingdoms of Moravia and Pannonia.<sup>1</sup>

This year is a remarkable benchmark because it suggests some of the reasons why the Slavs of today use national versions of either a Greek-based Cyrillic, or a Latin-based Roman alphabet. Both writing systems roughly delineate divisions between religious

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<sup>1</sup>Another expression is a 'princedom' since the rulers were denoted as princes: Prince Mojmir I (830–846), Rastislav (846–870) and his nephew Svätopluk (870–894). Arguably, however, the same caveat would apply here as perhaps with regards to the Welsh princes who were relatively independent rulers of small territories – and hence gradually in need of alliances with larger powers that would be unlikely to acknowledge them as 'true' kings. Even though, to all effects and purposes, they technically oversaw (sometimes very extensive) kingdoms as vassal kings, rather than princes. During the reign of Svätopluk, the territory of Great Moravia comprised of Bohemia and the modern territory of Moravia (now both in the Czech Republic), the southern part of modern Poland, and the western part of modern Hungary. Pannonia was an old province of the Roman Empire including what is now Slovakia, the western part of modern Hungary, parts of eastern Austria and large chunks of the Balkan states (Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia – Vojvodina). Cf. Moravia entry in Encyclopaedia Britannica Online: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Moravia> and the Pannonia entry <https://www.britannica.com/place/Pannonia>; both accessed on March 24, 2018.

confessions: the Cyrillic is used by the Orthodox Christians (as well as some Muslims in Bosnia), the Roman alphabet by the Catholics and Protestants.<sup>2</sup> Still, there is an arguably older script called Glagolitic (from the Proto-Slavic word ‘*golgolъ*’ – utterance, speech, or word), which is recorded as introduced into Moravia in 863 AD. (I will expand on this later.) This script continued an old tradition of using alphabets and literacy – and not just military power, wealth or authority – as a political tool.

However, I will argue in this essay that Glagolitic may have been more than an instrument of secular or religious power. It is quite plausible that it was an inspired, mystical tool: an alphabet intended for the meditation of Christian mysteries. S. T. Katz recognizes the value of alphabets in mysticism, noting that Jews, Christians and Muslims adopted various unusual methods of working with numerical and letter permutations that reach as far back as the Pythagoreans and some Neoplatonic thinkers including Plotinus.<sup>3</sup> He observes that many of the mystical traditions: ‘begin with the belief that their language is sacred – the very language of God ...’<sup>4</sup> This is obvious, for example, when Jewish Kabbalistic thinkers assumed that God spoke Hebrew and created the world through the Hebrew letters. As Idel observes, ‘letters were seen as energy that may directly trigger the creation when they are pronounced by God, or in their arrangement of Torah, they constitute archetypes of creation’.<sup>5</sup> I argue that although Glagolitic is not likely to have had the status of the cause of the existence of the entire world, it was esteemed as a divinely intended cause for the ‘creation’ of a whole nation under the ‘banner of Christ’. In this sense, Glagolitic letters constituted archetypes of creation of a specific people.<sup>6</sup>

Added to this, Idel distinguishes between four basic views of language in the Hebrew tradition<sup>7</sup>:

- (1) The constitutive nature of language where language (and especially the letters) is a tool for the creation of the world.
- (2) Theosophical-theurgical view present in the *Zohar* and Lurianic Kabbalah as well as eighteenth-century Hassidic mysticism where a proper use of language affects the divine realm because it symbolically reflects the structure of the divine.
- (3) Language as a technique for attaining mystical experience in medieval ecstatic Kabbalah and late Polish Hasidism.
- (4) Language as a means of capturing the divine in the ‘lower’ world of the created reality.

A famous Glagolitic poem, (the) *Proglas* (ⱄⱁⱂⱃⱄⱅⱆⱇⱈⱉⱊⱋ), of which we have copies originating only from the thirteenth century, points towards a thinking corresponding to

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<sup>2</sup>Cf. Schenker, *The Dawn of Slavic*, 165, n.186. Bosnian Muslims also have a history of using Arabic or Hebrew letters to transcribe Slavic (cf. 166).

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Katz, *Mysticism and Sacred Scripture*, 52. On mystical alphabets, cf. Katz, *Mysticism and Sacred Language*, 15–20 or Katz, *Mysticism and Sacred Scripture*, 52–6.

<sup>4</sup>Katz, ‘Mystical Speech’, 16.

<sup>5</sup>Idel, ‘Reification of Language’, 49.

<sup>6</sup>Glagolitic letters could be understood as constituting archetypes of God’s people even after the pattern of the Israelites: a specific people are called out of the desert of ignorance with a new Moses and Aaron (Constantine and Methodius) giving them the ‘letter’ of the new law (in Glagolitic) and making them thus God’s own people. Cf. the poem *Proglas* for such lofty ideas.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Idel, ‘Reification of Language’, 44; but also 45–72.

Idel's category three and four.<sup>8</sup> This poem says that 'every human heart needs the rain of God's letters'.<sup>9</sup> It is generally accepted that this poem, which is a beautiful prologue to the Glagolitic translation of the Gospels, was composed in iambic verse by Constantine The Philosopher (more about him later).<sup>10</sup> It was written to celebrate the new alphabet as a gift from God. In it, the evangelizer of the Slavs is inviting them to listen to the words of the Scripture written down in the medium of the (Glagolitic) letters.<sup>11</sup> I am therefore referring to this poem throughout my work because it is likely to be reaching back to Constantine the Philosopher and (even in the Cyrillic translation) it may well suggest his theology behind the new letters, including the mystical dimensions thereof. Due to the scope of this essay, and a different (memory aid) focus of the (originally Glagolitic) alphabetic prayers, I am not referring to them (save once for illustration).

The argument of the *Proglas* poem is that the prophets of old prophesized that 'Christ is coming to gather the nations' ('nation' – *jęзыкъ* – being the same word as 'tongue' or 'language') and that this is indeed taking place in the ninth century.<sup>12</sup> The prophets said that 'the deaf will hear the "lettered" (or scripted) W/word' and this gift is now given.<sup>13</sup> Without hearing the Word in a familiar tongue, any human soul seems dead.<sup>14</sup> Letters have the power to communicate God's law. 'Naked are all nations' (again, 'nations' – *jęзци* – is the same word as 'languages' or 'tongues') 'without books' – just like animals.<sup>15</sup> What is more, they are weak and vulnerable to the attacks of the enemy.<sup>16</sup> According to the poem, the letters change all this: they provide tools for spiritual self-defence, they guard against decay, and they guarantee life eternal.<sup>17</sup> In other words, Glagolitic letters facilitate a self-communication of God into the created reality as well as a spiritual awakening and an arguably mystical journey of a person (and a nation), as it were, all the way to heaven.

<sup>8</sup>*Proglas* was discovered in a Serbian manuscript from the fourteenth century by Hilferding only in 1858, cf. Vašica, 26–8. It was a copy of a much earlier poem. There is another fourteenth century Serbian version in Old Slavonic, a thirteenth century Serbian Chilandar manuscript and an incomplete sixteenth century Russian Trojicky manuscript. I had no access to any of these, so my work with *Proglas* is based on available secondary quotations and the version accessible on <http://www.litcentrum.sk/36106>. This should not be a drawback, however, since my paper is not a textual criticism of *Proglas* (nor any other Glagolitic artefact), but a work on the graphic and symbolic values of the first Slavic alphabet. For a captivating translation of '*Proglas*' as 'Pre-voice' with its tonal/melodic and liturgical connotations, cf. Zambor, 'O Proglase a jeho slovenských básnických prekladoch', 15–16.

<sup>9</sup>*na srъdbъcichъ ѡlovъčъscъchъ, dъždja boži bukъvъ* in *Proglas*, 71; in Pauliny, *Slovesnost' a kultúrny jazyk*, 129. My translation.

<sup>10</sup>His authorship has been occasionally contested in favour of Constantine the bishop of Preslav (a pupil of Methodius). However, the reference to Paul (1 Cor 14:19) wishing to speak five comprehensible words instead of a (ten) thousand in a foreign language is found both in *Proglas* and in *Vita Constantini*, 16. Although nowhere near conclusive, this may suggest that it was a point Constantine liked to make with regards to Glagolitic and the trilingual heresy (as will be seen later). As for the iambic verse, each verse has 12 syllables (5 + 7; 7 + 5; 6 + 6) and the Byzantine version, which Constantine uses, has a stop after the fifth or the seventh syllable. Cf. Zambor, 'O Proglase a jeho slovenských básnických prekladoch', 26. For more extended elaboration on iambic verse, cf. e.g. Kákošová, *Kapitoly zo slovenskej literatúry*, 19, and J. Minárik, *Stredoveká literatúra*, 124–5.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Zambor, 'O Proglase a jeho slovenských básnických prekladoch', 15–16, 17.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. *Proglas*, lines 2–3, 5: 'Jako proroci prorekli sъtъ přъzde, Chrіstъ grędetъ sъbъratъ jęзыкъ', and 'Se sъbystъ sę vъ sedmyi věkъ sъ' – where the seventh 'age' or millennium means the ninth century (counted since the Creation: 5508 years to Christ's birth plus 863 = year 6371); cf. <http://www.litcentrum.sk/36106>.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. *Proglas*, line 7: 'glusi slyšętъ slovo bukъvъnoje' and line 10: 'Darъ bo jestъ otъ Boga sъ danъ'.

<sup>14</sup>Cf. *Proglas*, lines 41–42: 'Pače že sego duša bezbukъvъna javljajetъ sę vъ človъčęchъ mrtъva'.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. *Proglas*, line 80: 'Nazi bo vъsi bes knięz jęзци'.

<sup>16</sup>Cf. *Proglas*, lines 81–83: 'brati sę ne mogōšte bez orōžija sъ protivъnikomъ dušъ našichъ gotovi mōky věčъnyjъ vъ plęnъ'.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. *Proglas*, lines 94–101: 'Iže bo sichъ slovesa glagoljōšte podobъni bōdōtъ vraga ubiti pobędō prinosęšte kъ Bogu dobro plъti, jeježe životъ jako vъ sъnъ ne padajōšte, krępъko že stojęšte, kъ Bogu javlъše sę jako chrabъri, stojęšte o desnojъ božija přęstola'.

This view would justify a theological investigation of Glagolitic on a par with the study of mystical elements within mainstream religious alphabets such as Hebrew (for the Kabbalistic Jews), Arabic (for the Sufi Muslims) or Sanskrit (for the Hindus). Since the aim of this essay is to map out some of the territory and thus continue the discussion in English, I will first explore the relevant historical context because this makes sense of the alphabet's authorship and origins. Then I examine some key graphemes (the smallest writing units) of the alphabet itself. In this, I focus on possible Christian imagery which seems to be included (or preserved) in Glagolitic. It is my aim to offer at least a glimpse at the internal (and arguably mystical) logic of the alphabet. Since it is my contention that even if Constantine did not invent Glagolitic completely from scratch, he still chose to use those specific graphemes (and no others) for a reason. What is more, he (with or without help) invented the names of the alphabetic letters in such a way that at least some of them code a comprehensible Christian message in Proto-Slavic. Therefore, let me first establish how these graphemes may have come to be.

In the eventful year 863 AD, two Macedonian brothers, the polymath Constantine The Philosopher (later known as the monk Cyril of Rome) and his older sibling Methodius, were invited by the Moravian ruler Rastislav (or Rostislav) for a special evangelizing mission to the Slavs.<sup>18</sup> Or, to be more precise, Rastislav was striving to guard his newly acquired independence also from the Bavarian/Frankish hierarchy answering to Rome. In *Vita Methodii*, 5 (Life of Methodius), which together with *Vita Constantini* (Life of Constantine) forms the Moravo-Pannonian Legend that deals with the lives of the brothers, we read that Rastislav (with his nephew Svätopluk) sent a request to Constantinople instead of Rome.<sup>19</sup> Rastislav told the young emperor Michael III that many Italian, Greek and German teachers had come to teach 'various ways' to the Slavs, but the truth kept escaping the people. He requested missionaries who would teach the Gospel in the vernacular. This was a practice, as Schenker observes, 'common in the Eastern churches (Armenian, Coptic, and Syraic) but totally unprecedented in the West'.<sup>20</sup> It is clear from *Vita Constantini* 14 that the Slavs had already been Christianized, but Rastislav was desiring religious education in the language of the people, hoping to even become an example to other countries. It is therefore plausible that this mission called for a specific legal, liturgical, and evangelizing tool – the Glagolitic alphabet – which was intended to help the Slavs become an independent political and religious unit.

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<sup>18</sup>On the meaning of 'philosopher' for Gregory of Nazianzus, whom Constantine admired, cf. Daley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 34–41. For Gregory '... philosophy was not simply theoretical speculation, but commitment to virtue, detachment from cares and passionate fixations, and longing for union with God. It began in conversion of heart and led, if fully realised, to total transformation; but it could be fully realised only in the company of friends. To be a philosopher, one needed not only books and ideas but a community ...' 41. Rastislav's name, as still preserved in some Slavic languages, implies 'growth' ('rast') and 'glory' ('sláva').

<sup>19</sup>*Vita Constantini* was probably written by Methodius, or by Constantine's disciple Kliment, and *Vita Methodii* by Methodius' disciple Gorazd. Apart from the online English versions that I am using (cf. bibliography), a version based on the edition by Fran Tomšič (in *Constantinus et Methodius Thessalonicenses: Fontes, recensuerunt et illustraverunt Franciscus Grives et Franciscus Tomsic, Radovi Staroslavenskog Instituta 4, Zagreb, 1960*) is available at [http://www.helsinki.fi/slaavilaiset/ccmh/vita\\_methodii.html](http://www.helsinki.fi/slaavilaiset/ccmh/vita_methodii.html). I had no access to the print edition of 'The Vita of Constantine; and the Vita of Methodius' by Kantor, M. There is also a *Roman (or Italian) Legend*, which is a somewhat condensed (and a slightly different source for the) life of Constantine.

<sup>20</sup>Schenker, *The Dawn of Slavic*, 31. With the advancement of historical research, this absolute statement may, of course, be contested one day. However, due to the growing Latin dominance, it still seems an unusual practice for a ruler to hunger for the vernacular to be used in religious affairs – especially since Rastislav's other (eastern) option could have been Greek.

The Macedonian brothers (Constantine and Methodius) came to Moravia in 863 AD armed with this new alphabet. I argue, together with Tschernochvostoff, Šubjaková and Uspenskij, that the brothers had risen to the challenge with something more sophisticated than just a set of (old or new) characters accommodating the Slavic language. Since the discussion about the roots of Glagolitic has not yet been conclusively decided, I will first outline some of the conversation to position my thesis about the mystical potential of Glagolitic within this horizon. In what follows, I will make use of Uspenskij's helpful distinction regarding the origins of the Glagolitic letters: they came about either naturally (*palaeographic* hypothesis) or artificially (*ideographic* hypothesis).<sup>21</sup> Let me take them in turn.

According to the *palaeographic* hypothesis, a certain alphabet (or a mix of them) could be traced as the source of Glagolitic. Schenker mentions Hebrew, Phoenician, Samaritan, Ethiopian/Coptic, Armenian, Georgian and Greek as possible candidates.<sup>22</sup> For instance, Vondrak, Nahtigal and Fortunatov were the scholars arguing for Oriental scripts as the blueprint for Glagolitic. Indeed, Hebrew 'a', 'b', 'p', 'r' and 's' could be seen as approximating to certain Glagolitic letters. Equally, Coptic 'she', 'hori' and 'ti' are perhaps slightly similar to other Glagolitic letters, the same being true of Samaritan 'š', 'r' and 'm'.<sup>23</sup> And indeed, these individual letters could have been an inspiration for some (predominantly) visual features of certain Glagolitic letters.

In the same vein, a (predominantly) visual similarity of some Glagolitic letters to the Greek was one of the reasons why from the nineteenth century onwards, the Greek alphabet was often postulated as the origins.<sup>24</sup> For instance, Tylor (1880), Leskien (1905), Jagić (1911) and Vajs (1932) argued along these lines.<sup>25</sup> However, the numeric values of the Glagolitic letters (unlike in the younger Cyrillic script) do not follow the Greek and this may suggest that, despite similarities, Glagolitic did not develop organically from other alphabets (such as Greek or Hebrew). In fact, the dissimilarity of Glagolitic with other alphabets seems to undermine the occasional visual (and very rarely also the numeric and/or symbolic) correlation with some characters from other alphabets. This dissimilarity is one of the reasons why various scholars hold Glagolitic to be unique: a creation rather than an evolution.

Proponents of the view that Glagolitic was introduced as a *new* phonetic alphabet (the *ideographic* hypothesis) by Constantine and his brother Methodius around 863 AD hold it entirely plausible that Constantine could have invented a brand-new alphabet: he was a linguist, diplomat, poet and mystic. There is at least one historical source, independent of *Proglas* or *Vita Constantini*, which acknowledges Constantine's abilities as a poet.<sup>26</sup> Anastasius, the papal librarian in the time of the Pope Hadrian II, mentioned Constantine's canon in his letter to Bishop Gauderich in 875 as being 'a canon of such beauty that Anastasius refrained from translating it into Latin for fear of not doing justice to its poetic qualities'.<sup>27</sup> Anastasius was apparently unable to preserve 'the harmony of the hymn'.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>21</sup>Uspenskij, *Glagolitic Script*, 1.

<sup>22</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 166 together with the footnote 189.

<sup>23</sup>For this and the previous lists of similar consonants, cf. Serafimov, 'The Origin', 100.

<sup>24</sup>Another reason was the testimony of the monk Khrabr, but I will explore this later.

<sup>25</sup>Cf. Schenker, *The Dawn of Slavic*, 166.

<sup>26</sup>Pauliny, Stanislav, and Dvorník argue for Constantine's authorship, while Macura and poet Knězek, argue for the authorship of Constantine the bishop of Preslav. But there is no evidence I know of that regards the latter as an exceptional linguist, an admired poet, as well as a thinker worthy of a title 'The Philosopher'.

<sup>27</sup>Schenker, *The Dawn of Slavic*, 197.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 33.

If we return to the admittedly hagiographical material of the *Vita Constantini*, which claims that Constantine invented the script, we find that the *Vita* is at pains to draw attention to Constantine's gift for languages. We find there the claim that, while on his mission to the Khazars, Constantine learnt Hebrew in the Greek colony of Cherson (Kherstones).<sup>29</sup> A Samaritan would then debate with him and Constantine locked himself up in a room and figured out the written language too. Additionally, he encountered someone with a foreign translation of the Scriptures and learnt yet another language; soon reading and speaking it.<sup>30</sup> It may have been Russian or Syrian.<sup>31</sup>

The exact word denoting the mysterious language puzzled many scholars and various readings were suggested (*surbskb*, *rušbkb*, *rošbkb*, *rusbskb*, or *rosbskb*).<sup>32</sup> It has even been suggested that the word could stand for Varangian Norsemen's Germanic – and therefore Ulfila's *Gothic* translation of the Bible. However, Vaillant (supported by discoveries of Jacobson and Lunt of some already existing scribal inversions of 'rus'/'sur') observes that the *Vita* already has Constantine refer to the Goths previously (in Venice) as 'Gofty'.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, it makes little sense that the author would use another word for the same people / group. I also do not think that Gothic is very likely because Ulfila was an Arian and so it is hard to imagine that the orthodox Constantine would be very interested in an Arian version of the Scriptures, or rather that the author of the *Vita* would associate him with it.<sup>34</sup> In fact, a similar argument would apply to the Syrians – as Istrin points out, they were mostly heretical.<sup>35</sup> Nonetheless, it is striking that the *Vita* has Constantine distinguish the letters, vowels and consonants of this 'mysterious' language by comparing them to *his own* language, suggesting the existence of a certain commonality between that particular language and Constantine's Slavic dialect from Thessaloniki.<sup>36</sup>

The hagiographical material does not mention Constantine's using some pre-existing letters in his creation of the Glagolitic script but it (perhaps) allows for some familiarity with a (possibly) Russian script. On the other hand, Constantine's disciple, the monk Khrabr (*Chrabr*), claims that Constantine created the 38 unique Glagolitic letters using 24 characters derived from the Greek alphabet and 14 based on the Slavic (spoken) language (which means the latter were invented or composed).<sup>37</sup> Some argue that Khrabr was a Bulgarian of a Preslav Literary School, others that he was Naum, a disciple of Methodius, who left for Ohrid after the death of his Teacher (885).<sup>38</sup> At any rate, Khrabr was at least the 'next generation' Slav who set off to justify Glagolitic in a different

<sup>29</sup>Cf. *Vita Constantini*, 8 for this and following.

<sup>30</sup>Notice the 'reading and speaking' it, but, curiously, not writing it.

<sup>31</sup>Cf. Schenker, *The Dawn of Slavic*, 176 (cf. *Vita*, 8). Since Khazars were at that stage interested in Judaism, it is likely that Constantine learnt or improved his Hebrew while in the vicinity. The other language Constantine learnt is not identified with certainty. Even futhark runes have been suggested on various internet blogs!

<sup>32</sup>Cf. *Vita Constantini*, footnote 33.

<sup>33</sup>For the word 'Gofty', cf. *ibid.*, 16. For Vaillant, cf. *ibid.* note 33. [I rectified the mistake in the footnote of Vaillant supposedly referring to Vienna when the event of Constantine's defence took place in Venice.]

<sup>34</sup>For Ulfila's Arianism, cf. Logan, *A History of the Church*, 18.

<sup>35</sup>Cf. *Vita Constantini*, footnote 33.

<sup>36</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 8. According to *Vita Methodii*, Constantine knew the Slavic language very well. For, when the emperor told both brothers to go to the Slavic territories, he maintained that all people from Thessaloniki speak clear Slavic language ('da Solunjanane vsi čisto slověnsky besědujotъ' *Vita Methodii*, 5). There is even a good chance, according to an oral tradition, that the mother of Constantine and Methodius was a Slav.

<sup>37</sup>For the Greek and Slavic ratio of the letters, cf. Kralčák, *Původ hlaholíky*, 88–90.

<sup>38</sup>Cf. Pauliny, *Slovesnost' a kulturny jazyk*, 27.

milieu.<sup>39</sup> It comes as no surprise then that he would refer to Greek, but it does not necessarily mean that Greek was Constantine's blueprint. Phonemes (the sound values) may have been 'derived' from Greek when Constantine sat down to work on the new alphabet, but it does not mean that the graphemes (the visual values) were too. And it is precisely the graphemes, and their alphabetic names, that are of interest to this work.

One of the scholars who accepts a notion of Constantine's authorship is Schenker. However, he remains a proponent of the *palaeographic* hypothesis because he looks mainly at the (visual) forms to help him trace the origins of the letters in other scripts. He argues that Glagolitic was 'designed specifically for the use of the Moravian mission' and it must therefore have palaeographically traceable origins as an alphabet.<sup>40</sup> Schenker observes that most of the newly devised alphabets 'are derived, ultimately, from the Semitic consonantal script, which has survived in modern Hebrew and Arabic'.<sup>41</sup> The Greeks added vowels to the North Semitic consonants, and this phonetic alphabet proved better suited to the structure of the Indo-European languages. This approach was emulated by Latin, which incorporated some Etruscan elements. Similarly, the Visigothic Bishop Ulfila created a consonantal-vocalic Gothic alphabet in the fourth century.<sup>42</sup> Apart from Latin, Ulfila incorporated Germanic runic elements while Mesrop, who devised the Armenian alphabet in the beginning of the fifth century, reorganized the Semitic-based Parsi script of Iran with the help of Greek.

Schenker may be correct in finding visual links across various alphabets even when it comes to Glagolitic, but he does not explain *why* such links may have existed. And at a closer examination, they are quite arbitrary. He also does not address the question why some visually comparable letters from different alphabets (often) do not correspond to the numeric or symbolic value in Glagolitic despite their formal (visual) resemblance. If Constantine was the author, he was at liberty to choose any letter-forms for his new script and so any similarity necessarily poses the question 'why?'. Unfortunately, the *palaeographic* hypothesis only searches for the 'what', the form, not the 'why', the idea. It seems therefore that if we focus only on the *palaeographical* hypothesis, we may be at risk of missing the point of the hagiographical material which aims to stress that Glagolitic is a *Christian* alphabet.

Fittingly, Schenker points out that: 'Constantine had every reason to wish to produce a distinctive writing system, one without *clear* associations with any of the other known alphabets'.<sup>43</sup> This goal would have been consistent with Constantine's opposition to what *Vita Constantini* calls 'trilingual heresy' (sometimes ironically called 'Pilate's heresy'); a conviction that only Greek, Latin and Hebrew used for the inscription on Jesus' cross were valid languages for liturgy and worship.<sup>44</sup> In other words, an opinion that only the scripts used by Pilate were acceptable carriers of the divine message and

<sup>39</sup>Khrabr's defence of the Slavic alphabet and language is in his only preserved work *Сѣказанье о писѣмечехъ (сѣборизьца Храбра)*.

<sup>40</sup>Schenker, *The Dawn of Slavic*, 165. Although I am not entirely sure how such conclusion would follow since the fact that most new alphabets were derived from the Semitic script does not guarantee that *all* would have to be. Customs – even customs of convenience – can be broken.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 166. What follows is also indebted to Schenker, *The Dawn of Slavic*.

<sup>42</sup>On Ulfila, cf. Logan, *A History of the Church*, 18.

<sup>43</sup>Cf. Schenker, *The Dawn of Slavic*, 166; my italics.

<sup>44</sup>'Trilingual heresy' is a pejorative term; possibly coined by Methodius himself (if he was indeed behind the writing of *Vita Constantini*). For the argument in Venice, cf. *Vita Constantini*, 16: 'We know ... of only three languages worthy of praising God in the Scriptures: Hebrew, Greek, and Latin'. In *Vita Constantini*, 18, Constantine prays for deliverance from the trilingual heresy in a fashion of Christ praying for his disciples in John 17.



liturgy.<sup>45</sup> An accusation that Glagolitic is therefore not valid became standard ammunition against the Proto-Slavic script (and liturgy) by the Franko-Bavarian clergy who had diplomatic stakes in the Slavic territories. The clergy did not like the assertion of a direct papal authority through Methodius, especially when Methodius' repeated travels to Rome (triggered by Frankish accusations of heresy) always ended up in Papal approval.<sup>46</sup> Methodius was eventually consecrated an archbishop of the newly resurrected dioceses spanning Moravia and Pannonia.<sup>47</sup> Glagolitic had a political currency, one inseparable from the political, religious and cultural independence of the Slavs.

It is useful to note too that according to the hagiography, Constantine never invoked the alphabet's Greek origin in his defence in Venice, where he was summoned to justify himself.<sup>48</sup> This continuity with Greek could have appeased the supporters of the 'trilingual heresy' and, by its inclusion in the hagiography, give Glagolitic a more palatable status even after Constantine's death.<sup>49</sup> More interestingly, archbishop Methodius, who continued the Slavic mission even after his brother's death in 885, was later still accused of sophistry and degradation of the Latin books and of discrediting the Mass by the '*newly invented* Slavic letters'.<sup>50</sup> This accusation seems to disqualify Constantine from having been inspired by any ancient Slavic scripts. The comment features in a document created by the Franko-Bavarian circles in Salzburg with the aim of discrediting the Rome-imposed archbishop Methodius and the whole Slavic mission. The remark about the novelty of the letters could amount to an accusation of heresy (i.e. a break with *the* tradition), whether true or not. Alternatively, it could mean exactly what it says: that Methodius was indeed using a brand-new alphabet.

A vague remark made by the already mentioned Khrabr may hint at roots in a Pre-Glagolitic script. Khrabr was writing in the late ninth – early tenth century.<sup>51</sup> In his defence of the Slavic alphabet (and language) called *On the Letters*, he maintains that while pagans, the early Slavs lacked books/letters and 'read and divined' by 'strokes and notches' (*črvtami a rězami*). His comments do not necessarily provide evidence that would link this to any new alphabet. Indeed, his critique might initially suggest the new alphabet as a rival to the 'strokes and notches' (preceded by some attempts to write the Slavic language in the Latin or Greek scripts 'without design').<sup>52</sup> However, given the heretical accusations levelled against Glagolitic this distancing might be read as a deliberate ploy to safeguard Constantine's script. At any rate, it does suggest that there was some sort

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<sup>45</sup>One may even surmise that the term 'Pilate's heresy' is perhaps implying an action of 'sentencing' the Word to a 'limitation' (akin to crucifixion) via imposing a human (deadly) law on the all-embracing divine love.

<sup>46</sup>Cf. e.g. the papal document *Industriae Tuae* which was sent from John VIII to Svätopluk. It refers to Methodius as the archbishop of Moravia and it affirms the alphabet ('letters') invented by Constantine.

<sup>47</sup>*Roman Legend*, 9 describes Methodius' ordination to priesthood in Rome and his consecration for the bishop of Pannonia is in *Vita Methodii*, 8. His being the bishop of Moravia features in *Vita Methodii*, 11 and his overseeing all Slavs comes in chapter 12.

<sup>48</sup>Cf. *Vita Constantini*, 16.

<sup>49</sup>Cf. Миронова, *Проблемы Эволюции*, 21 and *Vita Constantini*, 16.

<sup>50</sup>*Conversio Bagoariorum et Carantanorum*, 12; as quoted by Schenker, *The Dawn of Slavic*, 167 (my italics).

<sup>51</sup>Cf. Vajs, *Rukověť hlaholské paleografie*, 8. Vajs mentions two copies of Khrabr's work: one from fifteenth century (Moscow Spiritual Academy number 145) and the other from Chilandar's monastery on the Mount Athos. They both have a famous addition which says that those who saw Constantine and Methodius are still alive. This probably means that Khrabr was from (or familiar to) the circle of the brothers' disciples. Regrettably, the remaining manuscripts are all late thirteen and fourteenth century copies.

<sup>52</sup>Schenker, *The Dawn of Slavic*, 173.

of an early notation system prior to Glagolitic, despite the fact that no Slavic inscriptions older than Glagolitic have been found or recognized to date.<sup>53</sup>

Such ideas have been recently developed by Serafimov, who proposed a slightly different theory in 2008.<sup>54</sup> He exploits the very idea of a Pre-Glagolitic Slavic script and has some affinity with those scholars who have argued for a Greek-based pre-Constantine alphabet for the Balkan Slavs. These are, among others, Gregorian (1952), Lunt (1964) and Eckhardt (1989).<sup>55</sup> Except, Serafimov goes further than postulating a Greek-based pre-Constantine alphabet. He argues for a direct link to some Pre-Phoenician scripts instead.<sup>56</sup> This would be attractive if the scripts he proposed were all decoded and/or phonetic. Serafimov attempts to trace an unexplored link between Glagolitic and the undecoded Neolithic Vinča script of the Danube valley (around fourth millennium BC), the syllabic and logographic Linear A (un-decoded) and Linear B (around second millennium BC), and the elusive Scytho-Sarmatian runes (first to third century AD).<sup>57</sup> Only time (and linguistic ‘codebreaking’) will tell if his assertions are onto something. Still, the linguistic evidence to date is insufficient to demonstrate that Vinča (or any other script above) is a suitable candidate for the ‘strokes and notches’ mentioned by the monk Khrabr.

However, the biggest problem with all *palaeographic* hypotheses regarding the origins of Glagolitic is the randomness of graphic correlations. Often, the sound and/or numerical values of various approximated characters are different, and hence the unanswered question ‘why?’ (this presumed link between the graphemes) remains. Uspenskij summarizes that this lack of phonetic, numeric and/or symbolic correlation with Glagolitic means that ‘the similarity in form ... is unsupported at the level of substance and, consequently, has to be recognized as coincidental’.<sup>58</sup> He ignores this conclusion later by comparing certain Glagolitic letters with some Greek or Hebrew ones precisely because he is not doing a palaeographical investigation; he is looking for the *ideas* behind the correlation. So, the direction of his argument remains: the letters from different languages must have something more in common (such as the sound they signify or the numerical value they carry) than just a (visual) form (i.e. the way they look) to be justifiably related.

This attitude of looking for Constantine’s possible theological and mystical reasons for (even correlating foreign graphemes with) certain Glagolitic letter-forms is captured in the *ideographic* hypothesis. Yet, before I move on to this for the rest of the paper, let me first rule out one remaining palaeographic suggestion. Given the prevalence of Cyrillic nowadays, there have been some earlier theories regarding Glagolitic as an ‘offshoot’ of Cyrillic.<sup>59</sup> According to Vajs, however, the earlier status of the Glagolitic alphabet is justified for both linguistic and palaeographic reasons. For example:<sup>60</sup>

<sup>53</sup>This may not be surprising. The evidence suggests that the early Slavs, just like so many other cultures, used the inside of the birch bark for making inscriptions. Remarkably, even the first letter of Ogham alphabet (sometimes written on such bark) means ‘birch’ [beith].

<sup>54</sup>Cf. Serafimov, ‘The Origin’.

<sup>55</sup>Cf. Schenker, *The Dawn of Slavic*, footnote 195 on 174.

<sup>56</sup>Cf. Serafimov, ‘The Origin’.

<sup>57</sup>Although Linear B was deciphered by Ventric, and it seems to capture early Greek, Linear A remains a mystery because the underlying language is unknown. Yet, the large number of characters suggests a syllabic system. What is more, Linear B, with the help of which Linear A can be pronounced, is certainly syllabic and/or logographic (representing syllables or words by a symbol), not phonetic (representing only sounds). Hence, it seems peculiar to approximate (and even equate) syllabic and phonetic signs as Serafimov does.

<sup>58</sup>Uspenskij, *Glagolitic Script*, 1.

<sup>59</sup>For a handy survey, cf. Kralčák, *Pôvod hlalohilky*, 30–40.

<sup>60</sup>Cf. Vajs, *Rukověť hlalohské paleografie*, 15–20.

- (1) There is an independent Glagolitic numeric system (different from Greek)
- (2) Some Cyrillic letters such as ‘ш’, ‘ѣ’ and ‘ѥ’ are clearly taken from Glagolitic
- (3) There is no sign of pre-iotation in Glagolitic (‘ѣ, ѥ, ѧ’ = Cyrillic *iero*).

Added to this, and as shown by Kralčák (2014):<sup>61</sup>

- (4) There are some palimpsests in which early Glagolitic is scratched out and covered over by the later Cyrillic, but no instances of a reversed process have been found. What is more, Cyrillic marginal notes were written into Glagolitic texts and not vice versa.<sup>62</sup>
- (5) There are some Cyrillic copies based on Glagolitic originals (sometimes even including inserted Glagolitic verses, words or letters; or they use Cyrillic letters in their numeric value, but according to the Glagolitic system), but no instances of the reverse.
- (6) In the older documents, there are Pannonian, Moravian and Slovakian expressions such as *križb*, *papežb*, *bratrb*, *oltarb*, *mnichb*, *popb*, *krstiti*, etc.
- (7) The Glagolitic texts often contain older grammatical features and forms (such as *malaego* instead of the later *malaago*; short aorist forms, e.g. *pletb* instead of *pletochb*, etc.). Therefore, historical documents written in Glagolitic are more ancient in terms of language development.
- (8) The new names of the Glagolitic letters suggest a new alphabet.
- (9) The early Glagolitic is quite round and complex in terms of the scribe’s movements. As any language, it tended towards a more angular stylization, and therefore gradual simplification (which in time made it look more like Cyrillic).
- (10) Some letters (e.g. ѣ, ѥ, ѧ, ‘ı’) are opened to the left – which is a sign of an older writing system.<sup>63</sup>
- (11) The name of the earliest script created by Constantine in 863 (therefore not yet known as Cyril) is unlikely to be ‘Cyrillic’.<sup>64</sup>

The lack of similarity of, for example, the Glagolitic first letter ‘Ѡ’ with the Greek ‘Α/α’ also supports the now generally accepted palaeographic theory that the Glagolitic script predates Cyrillic because the latter obviously uses Greek as a template (while Glagolitic does not).<sup>65</sup> In fact, Greek was most likely used for the creation of the Cyrillic alphabet (not the Glagolitic) as a clear sign of the final political and religious surrender of Bulgaria to Byzantium.<sup>66</sup> In this sense, Cyrillic was not a sign of Slavic independence (as Glagolitic had been), but rather of submission.

In addition, the hagiographical literature points to Constantine as *the* unifying element behind either the creation or compilation of the new alphabet. His hagiography stresses a divine source for the alphabet and the monk Khrabr does not hesitate to call the alphabet ‘the gift of God’.<sup>67</sup> In the cumulative light of this evidence, the most fruitful view for this

<sup>61</sup>Kralčák, *Původ hlaholiky*, 35.

<sup>62</sup>Cf. also Pauliny, *Slovesnosť a kultúrny jazyk*, 80.

<sup>63</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 32; He paces J. Grim (1836).

<sup>64</sup>Cf. Kralčák, *Původ hlaholiky*, 31, He paces Dobner (1785).

<sup>65</sup>Cf. Schenker, *The Dawn of Slavic*, 165–6.

<sup>66</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 178 (including the footnote 203). On the superseding see cf. Pauliny, *Slovesnosť a kultúrny jazyk*, 27.

<sup>67</sup>Cf. Миронова, *Проблемы Эволюции*, 20.

paper is therefore Tschernochvostoff's *ideographic* proposition that the Glagolitic script exemplifies important Christian symbols. Tschernochvostoff was a student of Kiparskij and he claimed that Constantine wove the Glagolitic alphabet upon three basic Christian symbols: the cross of Christ; the circle of divine eternity; and the triangle of the most Holy Trinity.<sup>68</sup>

Therefore, whether we accept the *palaeographic* paradigm of either Constantine inventing Glagolitic from scratch, or utilizing some older scripts, or some other plausible explanation for its origins, the hagiographical material we inherited certainly viewed the task of its creation *ideographically*. The alphabet was prepared as a suitable tool for rendering the Word of God. Apart from Tschernochvostoff, Šubjaková and Uspenskij have pointed to the alphabet's underlying Christian principles and I will therefore explore their views now. Let us begin by looking closely at what the poetic and hagiographical material has to say about the alphabet and its creation.

A telling indicator can be found in (the) *Proglas* because it gives us significant clues about the perception of Glagolitic without any obvious hagiographical slant. It says, 'whosoever accepts these [Glagolitic] letters, to him (her) Christ will reveal [glagoljetъ] wisdom, and [will] strengthen your souls by [the same] letters'.<sup>69</sup> Here Constantine (preserved by his disciples) does not talk about the 'holy' words of the Gospel to which (the) *Proglas* is a preface.<sup>70</sup> He refers to the Glagolitic letters instead and recommends them as a fitting diet for a soul.<sup>71</sup> These letters are not just the constitutive elements of any and every word, they are also the 'constitutive elements' of the Word as revealed to each person. They are carriers of divine wisdom and strength. No wonder that the author (just like the monk Khrabr) calls them elsewhere in the poem 'the gift from God' and compares them to a rain in a metaphor reminiscent of Isaiah 55:10–11: 'As the seed that fell into the soil, so every human heart on earth needs the rain of God's letters so that God's fruit will grow to its fullest'.<sup>72</sup>

Given this 'flow' of the letters from God, the author seems to have understood his new letters as divine seeds of the Word emanating from on high and sprouting in accepting human hearts into the fullness of God's revelation, creating a nation (= language) in the process.<sup>73</sup>

If the poem is indeed capturing something of Constantine's thinking, or that of his circle, it may be the best proof we have that Constantine intended his new Glagolitic letters for the contemplation of Christian mysteries and, ultimately, for the union with God through Christ. And perhaps the author was even conscious of selecting the rain imagery for the same reasons Teresa of Ávila, many centuries later, used it as an image of infused contemplation in her autobiographical *Life*.<sup>74</sup> The 'passivity' of the earth juxtaposed with the 'activity' of the rain may well have played part in the choice of (the) *Proglas*' imagery, too.

<sup>68</sup>Cf. Kralčák, *Původ hlaholiky*, 67; and Šubjaková, *Hlaholika*, 34. These symbols have an attested meaning even in the Orthodox iconography.

<sup>69</sup>*Proglas*, 90–3 ('Bukъvi siję, iže bo priimetъ mōdrostъ tomu Christosъ glagoljetъ i dušę vašę bukъvami krępitъ'); in Pauliny, *Slovesnosť a kultúrny jazyk*, 129. My translation.

<sup>70</sup>Earlier in the same poem, Constantine admonishes his listeners (or readers), saying: 'hear the word, sent by the Lord, the word that feeds the hungry human souls, the word that gives power to your mind and heart, the word that will prepare you to accept the Lord' (adapted quote is from <http://www.hlaholika.sk/en/proglas>; accessed January 6, 2015).

<sup>71</sup>Cf. Zambor, 'O Proglase a jeho slovenských básnických prekladoch', 15–16, 23.

<sup>72</sup>Cf. *Proglas* on <http://www.hlaholika.sk/en/proglas>; accessed 06.01.15. For another reference to God's rain and letters, cf. *Vita Constantini*, 16. For this metaphor on growth being a play on Rastislav's name (growth + slava), cf. Zambor, 'O Proglase a jeho slovenských básnických prekladoch', 24 – *pace* Turčány.

<sup>73</sup>Cf. also 1 Cor 2:10.

<sup>74</sup>Cf. Peers, *The Complete Works*, 65 (chapter XI) and 108, 111 (chapter XVIII). Theresa compares four stages of prayer to four ways of watering the garden. The first one is the most laborious because it happens by fetching the water from a well.

Added to this, the hagiography argues for divine origins of the letters. This may have been a way of countering the accusations of heresy mounted against the Macedonian brothers, but the fact that (allegedly) the first ever translated sentence is actually mentioned offers some food for thought. *Vita Constantini* informs us that after receiving the mission:

[F]ollowing his old habit, the Philosopher [Constantine] went and gave himself up to prayer together with his other disciples. And God ... soon appeared to him. And he immediately devised the letters and began to write the words of the Gospel: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God’, and so on.<sup>75</sup>

During more than a millennium of its existence, Glagolitic underwent various changes. The most important one for this essay is the shift from the (early) round characters towards the (later) angular ones.<sup>76</sup> This means that some of the original graphic coding got lost as time went by. In addition, older texts may have had far less characters because some letters were joined up later to make up further ‘combined’ graphemes (i.e. ligatures).<sup>77</sup> Taking all of this into consideration, the earlier sources are arguably better for tracing the earliest visual form of the Glagolitic letters. Hence, the first Glagolitic sentence based on the early characters may have looked like this:<sup>78</sup>

ⲀⲚⲔ	Ⲛⲟⲛⲓ	Ⲕⲁⲗⲁ	Ⲛⲟⲛⲓ	Ⲛⲟⲛⲓ
I S K O N I	B j ä	S L O V O		
IN THE BEGINNING	WAS	(THE) WORD		
Ⲛⲟⲛⲓ	Ⲛⲟⲛⲓ	Ⲕⲁⲗⲁ	Ⲛⲟⲛⲓ	Ⲛⲟⲛⲓ
I S L O V O	B j ä	U	B O G A	
AND	(THE) WORD	WAS	WITH	GOD

The second one is accomplished by a water wheel and buckets. The third one happens by a stream or a brook and the fourth one by rain. The fourth way of prayer is contemplative and unitive; leading to the mystical union of the soul with God.

<sup>75</sup>*Vita Constantini*, 14; also quoted in Schenker, *The Dawn of Slavic*, 31. Some scholars believe that this passage refers to a homily based on these words ‘i načeto besēdo psāti jevangelsko’; cf. Pauliny, *Slovesnost a kulturný jazyk*, 80–1. As for the inspired origin of the letters, *Vita Constantini*, 14 also mentions the emperor’s letter to the vassal king Rastislav in which it is noted that the Glagolitic letters were ‘revealed’ to Constantine; cf. also Schenker (ibid.), 32. The passage quoted in the text above also hints at a communal aspect in the dawn of the alphabet (‘[he] gave himself up to prayer together with his other disciples’).

<sup>76</sup>Cf. Schenker, *The Dawn of Slavic*, 167.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid.

<sup>78</sup>For this transliteration, cf. Šubjaková, *Hlaholika*, 37. I chose this version because it allows me to illustrate the vertical symmetry of ‘s’ and ‘i’ at a glance. There is a different version in Codex Zographensis: [Ⲛⲟⲛⲓ, Ⲛⲟⲛⲓ Ⲕⲁⲗⲁⲗⲁ] ⲚⲟⲛⲓⲚⲟⲛⲓ ⲚⲟⲛⲓⲚⲟⲛⲓ Ⲕⲁⲗⲁⲗⲁ Ⲛⲟⲛⲓ Ⲕⲁⲗⲁ]. Cf. <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/83/ZografskiyKodeks.png>, accessed January 4, 2015. Codex Zographensis was found in nineteenth century on the Mount Athos and is dated to tenth–eleventh century. It has over 300 folios out of which 288 are in Glagolitic. The Codex also exemplifies an earlier form of the letter ‘k’ (ⲕ), which becomes ⲛ in later writing (and by extension the usual Glagolitic ‘k’/ⲕ computer font). A comprehensive analysis by Jagić in Latin, and the Codex text in Church Slavonic, is available here: [https://ia800306.us.archive.org/5/items/quattuorevangeli00jaguoft/quattuorevangeli00jaguoft\\_bw.pdf](https://ia800306.us.archive.org/5/items/quattuorevangeli00jaguoft/quattuorevangeli00jaguoft_bw.pdf). Different transcripts of John 1:1 do not negate further points I am making because my focus is on individual graphemes, not on the (correctly transliterated) words in the text.

Using this sentence as a visual example to illustrate certain symmetries, I will now expand on the *ideographic* approach. I will argue that whatever the origins of the alphabet, readers may have viewed the letters themselves as imbued with Christian potency.

According to Trubetskoj, 16 Glagolitic letters display vertical symmetry (with various degrees of likeness) and 8 letters differ from this principle.<sup>79</sup> As Tschernochvostoff first noticed, followed by Šbjaková and Uspenskij, the very first letters ‘i’ (Ѣ) and ‘s’ (Ѧ) in the word ‘iskoni’ display an uncanny mirror symmetry.<sup>80</sup> In fact, Tschernochvostoff argued that since ‘i’ and ‘s’ are a common shorthand for Jesus’ name ‘Is(us)’, this is the underlying reason for their symmetrical relationship.<sup>81</sup> In addition, Uspenskij explains that

[i]n Greek the abbreviated name of Christ was written with the initial *iota* (ΙΣ or ΙΗΣ, ΙΗ), never with *eta* (\*ΗΣ), and the Glagolitic abbreviation ѢѦ (as well as the Cyrillic ic) obviously renders the Greek abbreviation ΙΣ. Thus ... the Glagolitic Ѣ was originally correlated with the Greek *iota*, while the Glagolitic Ѧ/Ѧ was correlated with the Greek *eta*.<sup>82</sup>

Uspenskij argues further that Glagolitic adds a theological meaning to this abbreviation that is not present in Greek or Cyrillic. He argues that Jesus’ (shortened) name is an ideogram which captures the notion from the Book of Revelation where Jesus talks about himself as the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end.<sup>83</sup>

Only two other letters display a similar kind of completely inverted symmetry, namely, the letter ‘v’ (Ѣ) – *vědi* and the letter ‘d’ (Ѧ) – *dobro*. Tschernochvostoff did not have any plausible explanation for this, and it was therefore a weakness in his theory, but Uspenskij has provided a reasonable suggestion. He maintains that the letters ‘d’ and ‘v’ are yet another *nomen sacrum* (abbreviated sacred name), but this time signifying the king David.<sup>84</sup> Uspenskij argues from an extensive number of manuscripts that [i]n Old Church Slavonic the name of David may be written as дѦ/ѦѦѦѦ (as in Greek), дѦ/ѦѦѦѦ (as in Latin) and дѦѦ/ѦѦѦѦѦѦ, but in the Glagolitic manuscripts we also come across the abbreviation ѦѢ (= дѦ).<sup>85</sup> Significantly, Uspenskij concludes that this abbreviation is present in most ancient Glagolitic manuscripts and the symmetrical resonance of both letters (Ѣ and Ѧ as well as Ѣ and Ѧ) captures the idea of a circle and of mutual reinforcement.<sup>86</sup> Uspenskij’s theory neatly illustrates an *ideographic* hypothesis which ascribes theological meaning to the creation, naming and ordering of the Glagolitic letters.<sup>87</sup>

Furthermore, Uspenskij observes (with Tschernochvostoff) that the first letter (‘a’) of the Glagolitic alphabet is cruciform (Ѧ) and this is, according to Uspenskij, not only a Christian symbol (cross), but also a symbolic representation of Christ himself.<sup>88</sup> He supports the argument by referring to the Freising folia, which is the oldest Slavic manuscript

<sup>79</sup>Trubetskoj, N. S. *Altkirchenslavische Grammatik*, 1954 as quoted in Миронова, *Проблемы Эволюции*, 13.

<sup>80</sup>Cf. e.g. Kiparsky, ‘Tschernochvostoffs Theorie’, 393–400 and Kralčák, *Původ hláholiky*, 67.

<sup>81</sup>Cf. Kralčák, *Původ hláholiky*, 68, referring to R. Auty, *Old and New Ideas on the Sources of the Glagolitic Alphabet in Konstantin-Kiril Filosof. Dokladi ot simpoziuma*, 44. For an excellent exposition of this line of argument, cf. Uspenskij, *Glagolitic Script*, 9–10.

<sup>82</sup>Uspenskij, *Glagolitic Script*, 3, footnote 7.

<sup>83</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 9; and e.g. Rev 21:6 & 22:13.

<sup>84</sup>Cf. Uspenskij, *Glagolitic Script*, 11.

<sup>85</sup>*Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>87</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 14.

<sup>88</sup>Cf. *ibid.* Also Миронова, *Проблемы Эволюции* 12 for the identification of the graphic form of the letter with Christ.

written by Latin letters.<sup>89</sup> It reflects an old Slavic tradition to call Christ ‘*Cruz*’ (from Latin *crux*), which is still preserved in, for example, the etymology of Old Slovenian. This is a good illustration of a possible ideographic origin of the letter (✚). And since the name for this cruciform letter is ‘*azъ*’ – ‘I’ (the first person singular), Uspenskij reasons that this refers to the Greek Ἐγὼ εἶμι (*Azъ емь* in Slavonic), the ‘I am’ self-definition of God.<sup>90</sup> I would add that there may even be an intentional echo of St Paul here too (cf. Gal 2:20) as every Christian is to be ultimately identified with Christ. If this is true, a mystical union of a person with Christ may be hinted at as well. In a similar vein, Zambor contends that ‘*a*’ (✚ – *azъ/I*) works graphically as a sign of the cross in the word ‘Amen’ at the end of the poem (the) *Proglas*.<sup>91</sup> This means that apart from functioning as phonetic signs, individual Glagolitic letters may also have been (intended to be) tools for prayer and meditation of Christian mysteries.

It is not clear what the last letter of Constantine’s Glagolitic may have been. Some candidates are *jädъ* Δ; *uk* ⚡; *ižica* ⚡; or the nasal *jons* ⚡. Since the triangular shape features most strikingly in the character Δ (*jädъ* – food), I will briefly explore this symbol now. According to Šubjaková, *jädъ* (Δ) may have important Eucharistic connotations.<sup>93</sup> The name *jädъ* means food and (as already Tschernochfostoff pointed out) the triangular shape captures the notion of the Trinity. What is more, the ‘partitioning’ inside the letter looks a bit like a table. This is another example of an *ideographic* explanation for the letter’s visual form, as well as its Slavic name.

As we have seen, the triangle features very strongly also in the letters ‘*i*’ (⚡ – *i/and*) and ‘*s*’ (⚡ – *slovo/word*). According to Šubjaková, the triangle in the ‘*s*’ ⚡, combined with the circle on the top, bears a striking similarity to a small pictogram of a person.<sup>94</sup> She argues that the bottom triangle may symbolize the revelation of the Trinity ‘down on earth’ by Christ – the incarnate Slovo/Word.<sup>95</sup> Uspenskij develops a similar idea arguing that ‘the circle as a solar symbol may also be associated with Christ as “sol justitiae” (“the sun of righteousness”).’<sup>96</sup> If this is true, then it seems to me that the circular symbol of God’s ‘sun-like radiance’ on its top is quite possibly pointing towards this eternal aspect of God that is forever present in Christ the Head.<sup>97</sup> In fact, a circle of sorts is an ongoing unifying feature of most Glagolitic characters; implemented especially in ⚡, ⚡, ⚡, ⚡, ⚡, ⚡, ⚡, ⚡ (v, g, d, o, u, m, t, l). And as we have seen, among all six recognizable groups of letters, a very peculiar ‘circularity’ can be found in the symmetry of ‘*v*’ (⚡ – *věděl/(to) know*) and ‘*d*’ (⚡ – *dobro/good(ness)*).<sup>98</sup>

On the backdrop of this ‘rounded’ look of most Glagolitic letters, the Glagolitic *sha* (⚡) stands out. In other words, together with *azъ* (✚), *buky* (⚡), *kako* (⚡) and *jäd* (Δ), the ‘prongs’ of *sha* (⚡) stand out relative to the other (more rounded) letters of the alphabet.

<sup>89</sup>Cf. Uspenskij, *Glagolitic Script*, 14–15, footnote 25. As Uspenskij notes, Freising folia were written between 972 and 1039; but most likely before the year 1000 AD.

<sup>90</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 15–17. E.g. Jn 6:20; 8:24, 28; 13:19; 18:5 & 6, etc. Cf. also the Hebrew name of God in Ex 3:14.

<sup>91</sup>Cf. Zambor, ‘O Proglase a jeho slovenských básnických prekladoch’, 32.

<sup>92</sup>For *jädъ* Δ, cf. Šubjaková, *Hlaholika*, 41 – even though she does not specify her sources; *uk* ⚡, cf. Kralčák, *Původ hlaholiky*, 95.; *ižica* ⚡, cf. Schenker, *The Dawn of Slavic*, 172; or for nasal *jons* ⚡, cf. various alphabetaria.

<sup>93</sup>Cf. Šubjaková, *Hlaholika*, 38.

<sup>94</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 37.

<sup>95</sup>Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>96</sup>Uspenskij, *Glagolitic Script*, 8. Cf. also Malachi 4:2.

<sup>97</sup>In his 27th Oration, Gregory of Nazianzus says that ‘God is to intelligible things what the sun is to the things of sense’. As quoted in Daley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 36. Gregory was Constantine’s hero so he would be familiar with his theology.

<sup>98</sup>Cf. Привалова, М. И., Об Источниках Глаголицы Очерки Истории Языка, Ученые записки ЛГУ. No. 267. Л. 1960 as mentioned in Миронова, *Проблемы Эволюции*, 13.

The Hebrew or Samaritan *shin* (ש) is a well acknowledged *palaeographic* inspiration for this unusual Glagolitic letter, so I will focus only on its *ideographic* potential here.<sup>99</sup> *Sha* (ш) has no unifying circular shape, otherwise so characteristic of the Glagolitic script, and so it immediately looks unusual. This oddity is strengthened by the fact that it is probably the first ‘uncountable’ grapheme – that is, one with no numerical value. This means that *sha* (ш) is immediately noticeable on two counts: its distinct visual form and the lack of a numerical value.<sup>100</sup> In fact, Šubjaková claims that this misfit of a letter unlocks the spiritual depth of Glagolitic by introducing the Hebrew notion of peace – *shalom* – as a bedrock of the whole system.<sup>101</sup> She transcribes the *curative version* of Hebrew letters ‘*shin*’ ש, ‘*lamed*’ ל, and ‘*mem*’ מ left to right and finds them a perfect template for the Glagolitic consonants spelling the word ‘peace’: פ, ' , ך – **p, k, j** (‘pokoj’).<sup>102</sup>

The last indicator of the Glagolitic potential for evangelization as well as mystical prayer is the sometimes stunning acrophonic naming of the letters.<sup>103</sup> Most Glagolitic letters have their own numeric values which differ from Greek and this aids the conclusion that Glagolitic was (at least to a degree) not a descendant of Greek.<sup>104</sup> Added to this, the names by which the letters are known in the Glagolitic alphabet seem to form surprisingly clear statements if read in sequence.<sup>105</sup> These names, unlike the Greek ‘alpha’, ‘beta’, ‘gamma’, ‘delta’, ‘epsilon’, etc., can be read in triads and these triads sometimes appear to spell out a profound Christian message. For instance, the middle part of this alphabetic formation – ‘k’, ‘l’, ‘m’, ‘n’, ‘o’, ‘p’, ‘r’, ‘s’ – reads: ‘**People think how**’ (**k**ako **l**judie **m**yslite), ‘**He (is) our peace**’ (**naš**ъ **o**нъ **p**okoj), and ‘**speak the word**’ (**r**ъci **s**lovo).<sup>106</sup> This message seems to be going back full circle

<sup>99</sup>For the palaeography, cf. e.g. Vajs, *Rukověť hlaholské paleografie*, 97. He says: ‘Glagolitic ш is a foreign, non-organic letter in the Glagolitic alphabetic system: it is presumably of a Semitic origin. The original shape in the Kiev Palimpsest II suggests that it is taken from the Samaritan alphabet, of which shape it has not diverted in the consequent times. As in the Samaritan script, it does not reach the original Glagolitic height of other letters, it hovers in a higher position on the line gap (like the letter П) [my translation]. In the original it says ‘Hlaholské ш je cizí, neorganické písmeno v soustavě ostatní hlaholské azbuky: je zřejmě původu semitského. Původní tvar v II. Kyjevských nasvědčuje, že je vzato z abecedy samaritánské, od kteréžto tvaru se neuchýlilo mnoho v žádném z pozdějších období. Jako v samaritánštině, nedosahuje ani původní hlaholské výšky ostatních liter, drží se v horní poloze mezery linkové (podobně jako písmeno П)’. For the Hebrew *shin*, cf. Schenker, *The Dawn of Slavic*, 171. For the Samaritan influence, cf. Vajs, *Rukověť hlaholské paleografie*, 97.

<sup>100</sup>The idea of *sha* (ш) having a numeric value of 2000 is based on later texts and comes from Trubetzkoy. Cf. Schenker, *The Dawn of Slavic*, 182, n. 209. For further discussion on the numerical relations after the number 1000, cf. Veder, *Glagoljica i hrvatski glagolizam*, 375–87, accessed on [https://www.academia.edu/8615898/The\\_Glagolitic\\_Alphabet\\_as\\_a\\_Text](https://www.academia.edu/8615898/The_Glagolitic_Alphabet_as_a_Text) 05.01.16. p. 2, n. 4.

<sup>101</sup>Cf. Šubjaková, *Hlaholika*, 41–4.

<sup>102</sup>Cf. <http://www.hlaholika.sk/hlaholika-0> and Šubjaková, *Hlaholika*, 42.

<sup>103</sup>Acrophonic denotes the use of a word in which its name begins with the same letter of the alphabet it refers to. For Glagolitic as an evangelization tool, cf. Миронова, 12. The evangelization would also comprise of a legal dimension: cf. Pauliny, *Slovesnost a kulturní jazyk, pace Vašica, Literární památky*, 81: especially in *Vita Methodii* - ‘send us a man who will introduce for us **truth** (truth - ‘prauda’ meaning **common justice/law**) and *Vita Constantini* - ‘because good **law** comes forth from you to all sides’ [my emphasis in both quotes]. This was possibly referring to *Ekloga*, Byzantine law book from 740 AD of which some parts were translated by the brothers from Thessaloniki as *The Court Law to the People*. At any rate, justice and law are intimately connected to the notion of peace and order.

<sup>104</sup>They do not follow the numeric value in the Greek alphabet – unlike Cyrillic. As we have seen, this is one of the arguments for the Glagolitic alphabet being older than Cyrillic.

<sup>105</sup>Cf. Honselaar, de Haardt and Westeijn, *Die het kleine eert*, 355–63 accessed on <http://www.academia.com> 20.08.15. Esp. footnote 27. Although it would be interesting to trace any possible notional links with the names of runes as carriers of recognizable meaning, the unique feature of Glagolitic is the fact that the letter-names do not seem to stand in isolation. They seem to linguistically relate to the names of the preceding or following letters and form thus unified wholes. Unlike runes, they tend to form strings of meaning larger than individual characters.

<sup>106</sup>I am putting emphasis on each first letter in both English and (transcribed) Glagolitic for the sake of clarity (due to a different word order in both languages). Other instances could be – **I know letters** (**Azъ buky vědě**), (**To**) **speak is good** (**glagoly dobro estъ**) ... **Say** (the) **hard word / say** (the) **word hard** (**rъci slovo tvrdo**). For a more creative work with the acrostic-acrophonic, see Šubjaková, *Hlaholika*, 45.



to the idea of peace-*shalom*, but with the stress on the word ‘**how**’ – *kako* (†) because it is emphatically at the beginning.<sup>107</sup> Unsurprisingly, *kako* (†) is yet another ‘unusual’ letter which can be traced back to the Hebrew letter *lamed* (ל).<sup>108</sup>

I suggest that one can take this further and analyse the letter-names that make up the most important religious words in a quazi-Kabbalistic fashion as well. Just to illustrate, the letter ‘b’, *buky* (Ѣ), means ‘letters’.<sup>109</sup> If we discount the ending ‘jer’ – ‘ǰ’ (i.e. when it is dropped as it sometimes would be), the letter ‘*buky*’ (Ѣ) also implies the meaning ‘God’ through the common abbreviation: Ѣ[ǰ] = ‘*B*[(*og*)ǰ]’. What is more, spelling out all the letters of the Proto-Slavic word ‘Bog’ – ‘God’ can prove remarkably engaging. The names of the letters in this word unveil a compelling Christian message: **Buky Onъ Glagoly** (Ѣ-ǰ-Ń): **He Speak(s) Letters** (B-O-G). In other words, the Christian God speaks the Word; he pronounces the Logos. It is hard to imagine that this message is completely accidental given the care that seems to be embedded in the naming of the letters throughout the alphabet. In other words, someone (most likely Constantine) thought of what these names mean and how they work within the alphabet. So, a certain intentionality is readily conceivable when it comes to key religious words as well.

I have argued for a mystical potential embedded within the graphic, semantic and auditory features of most (if not all) Glagolitic letters. It is, of course, very difficult to prove this possible dynamism with certainty because of the way Glagolitic was suppressed after the death of both brothers. At the end of the ninth century, when the Slavic mission was forcefully liquidated by the Franco-Bavarian clergy after the death of Methodius, Glagolitic was replaced by the Latin script. Since both brothers were now deceased, some of the disciples ended up at a slave market in Venice, bought to freedom by someone connected to the Byzantine court.<sup>110</sup> Others fled the persecution and relocated to Bulgaria. For political reasons, they invented a new script (based on Greek) and they called it ‘Cyrillic’ in honour of their teacher Constantine-Cyril.

Since Latin was reintroduced in Pannonia and Moravia, no Glagolitic textual evidence dealing *explicitly* with mysticism has been preserved and this complicates research. Even though Glagolitic survived alongside Cyrillic until the twentieth century in the liturgy of a few Catholic parishes in Western Croatia, mainly in the islands of the Quarner archipelago,

<sup>107</sup>Since the alphabetic names come without punctuation, there is a chance it could read, ‘How do you, people, think he is our peace? Speak the word!’

<sup>108</sup>Cf. Schenker, *The Dawn of Slavic*, 169.

<sup>109</sup>Cf. Slawski, *Słownik prasłowiański*, 444. As far as I know, it has not been pointed out that the letter ‘b’, *buky* (Ѣ), can also mean ‘beech trees’. A different ending [‘buka’] means ‘a strong/loud voice’ and it comes from the root ‘buki’ (meaning both beech tree/fagus as well as rumbling/loud noise). Both meanings are still preserved in, for instance, Slovakian where the words ‘bučat’ [a sound cows produce] and bečat’ [a sound sheep produce] etymologically originates in the same root as the word buk [beech tree]. This is a peculiar connection and I have not been able to find an explanation for this link, nor for Constantine’s use of this name – even though some pagan thunder deity connected to an old Slavic tree worship, recorded perhaps in *Vita Constantini*, 12, is a tempting conjecture. As the footnote 84 in *Vita Constantini* states: ‘the Greek Emperor Constantinus Porphyrogenitus (913–959) notes that Russians made animal sacrifices before a huge oak on an island named after St. Gregory (see De Administrando Imperio, ed. Gy. Moravcsik, tr. R.J.H. Jenkins [Budapest, 1949], 56–63). Apparently, this tribe had been christianized but still retained some of its pagan customs.’ Is Constantine ‘baptizing’ those sentiments? There is also the Ogham script with its tree names for letters – perhaps a similar idea lurks behind both? Still, Constantine may have known something about beech trees we do not. I am only reminded of a Slavic connotation of health and stature when referring to beech trees (often healthy young men can be compared to beech trees, conveying a similar notion to the cedars of Lebanon in Hebrew).

<sup>110</sup>This is recorded in the *Vita/Life of Naum*. This is a legend regarding one of the most important Slavic disciples of Constantine and Methodius, Naum. Five versions of his *Life* exist: three Slavic and two Greek. For more on Naum, cf. Škoviera, *The Second Slavonic Life*, 11–19, Bratislava, 2014. The slavery and the Venice events are also mentioned in Schenker, *The Dawn of Slavic*, 198, but he does not mention which *Life of Naum* he used (most likely the older Slavic version).

it is now almost extinct. Admittedly, it was briefly used by a portion of the Western Slavs during the fourteenth century when Charles IV of Bohemia and King Casimir of Poland tried to reintroduce the Slavic liturgy with the help of a few Benedictines from Dalmatia. And, as Verkholtantsev has shown, this was also the time when the legend of St Jerome as the author of Glagolitic was invented because it offered an ‘approved’ Latin origin of an already ‘verified’ translator of the Vulgate from hundreds of years before the schism.<sup>111</sup>

Despite the scarcity of suitable documents dealing with the mysticism of the Glagolitic letters, I have attempted to build on the poetic logic of (the) *Proglas*, some hagiography pointers as well as the recent *ideographic* research. I attempted to show that the inner dynamism of the Glagolitic alphabet may have the capacity to initiate a mystical journey through its graphic as well as semantic features. As a conclusion, I suggest that the profoundly mystical potential of this unique alphabet is the most overlooked reality in the mystical studies to date. It is my hope that if taken on board and studied at depth, the mystical elements of Glagolitic can open fruitful avenues not only for a novel appreciation of Proto-Slavic literature, but also for enriching our view of mystical traditions and their historical developments.

## Acknowledgements

### *Special fonts acknowledgements*

#### **BukyVede**

(<http://kodeks.uni-bamberg.de/aksl/schrift/BukyVedeBackground.htm>; accessed January 1, 2016). The *regular* weight is based on CyrillicaOhrid and GlagolicaBulgarian (with additions from Rumen Lazov), adapted to Unicode 5.1 and enhanced by William R. Veder, Chicago; final touches, additional characters and font generation by Sebastian Kempgen, Bamberg, 2008–2015. The *bold* and *italic* weights were created by Sebastian Kempgen 2011, who added a light weight in 2015.

**Menaion Unicode and Menaion Unicode TT** (based on the Menaion font designed by Victor A. Baranov at the Manuscript Project and reencoded for Unicode by Aleksandr Andreev) were also used in this work.

**ALPHABETUM Unicode** was created by Juan-José Marcos and the font is available on <http://guindo.pntic.mec.es/jmag0042/alphaeng.html>.

Font **Hlaholika** is available on <http://www.hlaholika.sk/fonty-0>.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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<sup>111</sup>For a good investigation and refutation of this legend that Jerome was a Slav and composed the Glagolitic alphabet, cf. Verkholtantsev, *St. Jerome, Apostle to the Slavs*, 37–61, 2012; Verkholtantsev, *St. Jerome As a Slavic Apostle*, 251–86, 2013 and Verkholtantsev, *The Slavic letters of St. Jerome*. She builds on, and deepens, the work of scholars who already refuted the legend in the eighteenth century.

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