

The Slavic Alphabets

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The historical background

Traditionally the first Slavic writing is credited to Constantine—also known as (St.) Cyril, the name he took on becoming a monk—who, with his brother (St.) Methodius, led a mission from Byzantium to the Moravian Slavs in the early 860s. In preparation, they reputedly created an alphabet in which to write the liturgical texts in “Slavic.” There is no factual evidence of any writing of a Slavic language before that time.

There are, however, many formal problems with this account, all centering around the fact that *two* alphabets were clearly “created” to fit Slavic needs: Glagolitic and Cyrillic (TABLE 27.1). Cyrillic presents little trouble: it is clearly based on uncial (capital) Greek, and its problems are reduced to determining the origin of the letters which could not have come from Greek, such as those representing the sounds [ʒ, ʃ, tʃ, ts], which Greek did not have.

The search for the formal origins of Glagolitic remains unsolved. One very popular view has been that Glagolitic is a *totally individual creation*, the corollary being that the creator was Constantine; the advantage of this view is that it obviates the need to find a formal model in some other alphabet. But most popular of all is the view that Glagolitic is based on Greek cursive forms, and that it predates Cyrillic. While there is much uncertainty about many of the derivations, the general principle seems provable—that is, most Glagolitic letters can be derived from Greek cursive forms in a way that is formally satisfying. Many other “sources” have been suggested for Glagolitic, in fact almost any alphabet which was around the relevant area at the time; however, none of these has been as generally accepted as the cursive Greek view.

Circumstantial arguments put forward to support the priority of Glagolitic over Cyrillic order include: the existence of palimpsests (reused manuscripts) with Cyrillic superimposed on Glagolitic, but none in the other direction; the identification of linguistic features which unite the western (Macedonian) area with Glagolitic (e.g. no Turkisms), and the eastern (Bulgarian) area with Cyrillic (presence of Turkisms); and the putative superiority of Glagolitic as representative of the early Slavic phonological system. None of these features is really of any clear significance, and all have been challenged.

The most likely scenario is as follows: Glagolitic was formed by the adaptation of cursive Greek by some Slavs during the couple of centuries preceding the 860s; it

was formalized by Constantine, who also added letters for the non-Greek sounds; Constantine's disciples in Bulgaria (in the 890s) perceived Glagolitic as unsuitable for Church books and made up a new Slavic alphabet based on the "more dignified" uncial Greek. The remaining formal questions are then: Where did the added letters come from in Glagolitic? and, Can we satisfactorily derive the non-Greek Cyrillic ones from the Glagolitic?

Of the many Slavic sounds not existing in Greek, the most obvious are the palatals [ʒ, ʧ, ʃ]—but also [ts] and [b]; and of course many vowels, especially the nasals, the *jers* (mid-high *ĩ, ŷ*) and *jať* (low front *ě*). Very little attempt has been made at finding sources for the vowel letters; most attempts at finding sources for the palatals and [ts] offer multiple sources, e.g. Coptic for [ʒ] and Hebrew for [ʃ], [ʧ], and [ts]. One might suppose that when Constantine created the new Glagolitic letters, he would have used some consistency in his choice of sources, and would as far as possible have sought a single source for all these sounds; one might argue for Armenian as such a source for the consonants, and Greek (variants) for the vowels (Cubberley 1982: 299–302).

As for the Cyrillic versions of these Slavic sounds, there are enough similarities to allow a derivation from Glagolitic. Thus we can derive Cyrillic ж з, ц c, в ě from Glagolitic ѿ, ѡ, ѣ respectively; ш љ is the same in both; for the vowels we derive ѣ "ŷ, ѡ "ĩ, ѡ ѡ, ѡ ѡ, ѡ ѡ respectively; while the symbol originally used for *jať* (*ě*)—Cyrillic ѣ, Glagolitic ѡ—has been confused through the many changes and local reflexes of this Proto-Slavic sound (Cubberley 1984: 284–85).

The question of the naming of the two alphabets is a minor one and is probably most simply explained by a confusion in the reporting of the creation of "the alphabet," since no early source talks clearly of two alphabets or uses either of these names (except for one 11th-century one which appears to apply the name *коуриловица kurilovica* to Glagolitic). Sources usually talk only of the *bukvica* or *azbuka* (both 'alphabet'), with no further qualification. Only much later did either name, whether that of Cyril (*kirillica* 'Cyrillic'), from Constantine's adopted monastic name, or Glagolitic (*glagóllica*), from *glagol-* ('word, say'), become attached to one or the other alphabet.

Forms of letters and phonological fit in old alphabets

The original Glagolitic letters are regarded as having been a good fit for the original system (Macedonian Slavic); unfortunately, it is likely that many of the original letters have been displaced through Cyrillic influence as well as confusion through the early spread to other dialectal areas (Moravia, Serbia, Bulgaria). Cyrillic certainly acquired one set of digraph and ligature from Greek, namely the forms оу/Ѹ for [u]. It expanded on this practice for non-Greek sounds, first in the case of the vowel [y], which in one of its origins came from a sequence like [ə] + [i], and this sound became written first as the digraph ѣ or ѣи, then the ligature ѣ (and still later ѣ). The original

TABLE 27.1: *Old Slavic Alphabets*

OCS Cyrillic	Num. Value	Glagolitic		Num. Value	Name	Transliteration		Sound (IPA)
		OCS	Croatian			ISO	LC-1991	
а	1	ⲁ	Ⲟ	1	azъ	a	a	[a]
б	—	Ⲃ	Ⲣ	2	buky	b	b	[b]
в	2	Ⲅ	ⲣ	3	vědi/vědě	v	v	[v]
г	3	Ⲇ	Ⲥ	4	glagoli/glagolъ	g	g	[g]
д	4	Ⲉ	Ⲭ	5	dobro	d	d	[d]
е	5	Ⲫ	Ⲯ	6	jestъ/estъ	e	e	[ɛ]
ж	—	Ⲭ	Ⲱ	7	živěte	ž	zh	[ʒʲ]
ѕ	6	Ⲯ	Ⲳ	8	(d)zělo	dz	ž	[dzʲ/zʲ]
з	7	Ⲱ	Ⲵ	9	zemlja	z	z	[z]
и	8	Ⲳ	Ⲷ	20	i, ižei	i	i	[i]
ї/і	10	Ⲵ/Ⲹ	Ⲹ/Ⲻ	10	iže	i	ī	[i]
ћ	—	Ⲷ	Ⲻ	30	đerвь/dervъ	ǰ	ǰ	[gʲ/dʲ/j]
к	20	Ⲹ	Ⲽ	40	kako	k	k	[k]
л	30	Ⲻ	ⲽ	50	ljudъje/ljudije	l	l	[l]
м	40	Ⲽ	ⲿ	60	myslite/myslěte	m	m	[m]
н	50	ⲿ	ⲻ	70	našъ	n	n	[n]
о	70	ⲻ	ⲽ	80	opъ	o	o	[ɔ]
п	80	ⲽ	ⲿ	90	rokoj	p	p	[p]
р	100	ⲿ	ⲻ	100	ръci	r	r	[r]
с	200	ⲻ	ⲽ	200	slovo	s	s	[s]
т	300	ⲽ	ⲿ	300	tvrdо/tverdo	t	t	[t]
ou/у/8	400	ⲿ	ⲻ	400	ukъ/ikъ	u	u/ū	[u]
ф	500	ⲻ	ⲽ	500	frtъ	f	f	[f]
х	600	ⲽ	ⲿ	600	chěгъ/chegъ	x	kh	[χ]
ω/Ѡ	800	ⲿ	ⲻ	700	otъ	o	ō	[ɔ]
ц	900	ⲻ	ⲽ	900	ci	c	ts̄	[tsʲ]
ч	90	ⲽ	ⲿ	1000	čгвъ	č	ch	[tʃʲ]
ш	—	ⲿ	ⲻ	(800)	ša	š	sh	[ʃʲ]
ш	—	ⲽ	ⲿ	(800)	štja	št	sht	[ʃʲtʲ]
ъ	—	ⲻ/ⲽ	ⲽ	—	jerъ	ʹ/ъ	ʹ	[ʉ/ɔ]
ы/Ѣи	—	ⲻ/ⲽ	ⲽ	—	jerу	y	y	[ɨ]
ь	—	ⲻ	ⲽ	—	jerъ	ʹ/ь	ʹ	[ɨ]
ѣ	—	ⲽ	ⲿ	—	ěтъ/jatъ	ě	ě	[æ/e]
ю	—	ⲽ	ⲿ	—	ju	ju	iū	[ju]
я	—	—	—	—	ja	ja	iā	[ja]
ј	—	—	—	—	(je)	je	iē	[je]
а	900	ⲽ	—	—	jusъ malyj	ę	ę	[ɛ]
ѡ	—	ⲽ	—	—	jusъ malyj jotirovannyj	je	ię	[jɛ]
ѣ	—	ⲽ	—	—	jusъ boľšij	q	q	[ɔ]
ѣ	—	ⲽ	—	—	jusъ boľšij jotirovannyj	jq	ię̄	[jɔ]
ѣ	60	—	—	—	ksi	ks	kš	[ks]
ѣ	700	—	—	—	psi	ps	pš	[ps]
ѣ	9	ⲽ	—	—	(thita)/fita	f	ř	[f]
ѣ	400	ⲽ	ⲽ	—	ižica	i/v	ý	[i/v]

Slavic sequences of [i] + any vowel, which had by this time been reduced to [j] + vowel, then became written as ligatures of i + vowel (ⱱ *ja*, Ⱳ *je*, ⱳ *je*, ⱴ *jq*). Interesting here is Ⱶ—which, despite its shape, represents [ju] and not [jo], the latter still being an impossible sequence at that time. Further, this is the only sequence of [j] + vowel with a letter (not apparently a ligature) in Glagolitic, ⱶ; and this may signify that it actually represented a different sound at first, most likely [u], until this was replaced by the ligature on the Cyrillic/Greek model (ⱷ *u* from ⱸ *o* + ⱹ *v*). The only obvious ligatures in Glagolitic are those with the nasal vowels ⱺ *je*, ⱻ *q*, ⱼ *jq*, and these too are taken to be later formations based on the Cyrillic model. One final form of interest is the letter ⱽ *št*, usually taken to be a ligature of Ȿ *š* and Ɀ *t*, which looks possible for Cyrillic but not for Glagolitic; most likely this was an original Glagolitic form for a single sound (the reflex of Proto-Slavic **tj*), which became perceived as the letter for the sequence [ʃt] in the Bulgarian area and was interpreted as a ligature. Its numerical value also indicates that its original place was different.

Also inherited from Greek was the use of the letters for numerical value; note that the Glagolitic letters have the values in their Slavic order, while Cyrillic follows the inherited Greek order, including the Greek-only letters (the last four), with the non-Greek letters/sounds assigned no numerical value. The numerical value was indicated by a tittle over the letter(s), e.g. Ɀ̄ = 11. The tittle also had the inherited Greek function of indicating an abbreviated common word, e.g. Ɀ̄сѣ = христосѣ *xristos* ‘Christ’.

As for the order of letters, it followed Greek for the common letters; two non-Greek letters, Ɀ *b*, ⱽ *ž*, were seen as phonetic variants of Slavic sounds Ɀ *v*, ⱽ *dz* and placed before them; the rest were added after the “omega” Ɀ/Ȿ *o*, the consonants first, then the vowels; at the very end were placed the letters for non-Slavic sounds.

Glagolitic: Later history

After the initial period (to the end of the 9th century), Glagolitic continued to exist alongside Cyrillic in the Bulgarian/Macedonian area, around the centers of Preslav and Ohrid, until the beginning of the thirteenth century. However, Cyrillic steadily became dominant throughout the twelfth century. (It was during this period of coexistence of Cyrillic and Glagolitic that Glagolitic underwent the above-mentioned reverse influence from the increasingly popular Cyrillic in the shapes and variants of several letters.) Glagolitic also survived for a couple of centuries in Serbia and Bosnia; it was even used for limited periods, in some Church practice only, in the Polish and Czech areas (14th–16th centuries). Its subsequent history, though, belongs almost exclusively to the Croatian area, where it not only survived but flourished for many centuries—a somewhat paradoxical situation, in that these were the areas early dominated by the Roman church. In fact, Glagolitic became the symbol of some independence from Rome, and it was tolerated by Rome as a small concession permitting its

