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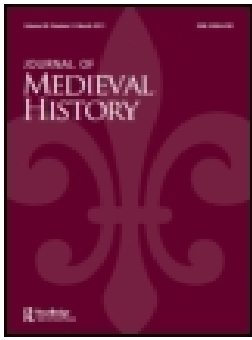
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Inventing and ethnicising Slavonic in the long ninth century

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ABSTRACT

This article situates the scholarship on the invention of the Slavonic alphabet within the discipline of literacy studies practised in Western medieval contexts. In so doing it identifies some of the methodological assumptions that have shaped the study of the invention of Slavonic, and proposes a new reading of the invention and ethnicisation of the alphabet, from a new methodological starting point. It demonstrates that the ethnicisation of Slavonic begins in the rewriting of the invention of the alphabet found in the *Life of Methodios*. It then argues that this rewriting emulates the discourse about conversion found in Latin missionary texts, from Gregory the Great onwards, where it is assumed that each ethnic group needs its own Church.

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The body of scholarship termed ‘literacy studies’ and its main methodological questions have seldom, if ever, interacted with the study of medieval Slavonic.¹ To give but one example, the ninth-century invention of the Slavonic alphabet, in particular, remains a glaring absence from the vast corpus of volumes devoted to medieval literacies published by the Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy, and likewise, the Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy remain unmentioned in the bibliographies of scholars publishing on the invention of Slavonic.² Beyond the question of cross-cultural comparison, this non-contact has resulted in a more fundamental absence of theorisation of writing in studies of the invention of Slavonic. This has led to the fossilisation of a number of common-sense assumptions about the alphabet and its spread. These assumptions are guided by ideas about writing and its drivers, but these are rarely made explicit or critically assessed.

This article has two purposes. Firstly, it assesses the assumptions about writing made by scholars of the invention of Slavonic, and situates these within the methodological

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¹ The only exception is the work of Simon Franklin, which nonetheless deals with Rus, in a later period: *Writing, Society and Culture in Early Rus, 950–1300* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

² With 50 volumes published since 1999, the Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy has focused primarily on Western European history: there are only two volumes on later medieval literacy in Central and Eastern Europe, and no study or studies on the invention of Slavonic. See <http://www.brepols.net/Pages/BrowseBySeries.aspx?TreeSeries=USML> (Accessed April 2020). Likewise, no engagement with this corpus or literacy theory more broadly can be found in, for example, Pavel Kouřil, ed., *The Cyril and Methodius Mission and Europe: 1150 Years Since the Arrival of the Thessaloniki Brothers in Great Moravia* (Brno: Institute of Archaeology of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, 2015); Jovanka Radić and Victor Savić, eds., *Ćirilo i Metodije, 863–2013* (Belgrade: Institut za srpski jezik SANU, 2014); Anthony-Emil Tachiaos, ed., *Kyrillos kai Methodios: to Byzantio kai o Kosmos tōn Slabōn* [in Greek: *Cyril and Methodios: Byzantium and the World of the Slavs*] (Thessaloniki: Thessprint A.E., 2015).

frameworks of ‘literacy studies’ broadly conceived. Secondly, it proposes an alternative methodological standpoint on the drivers of writing and literacy in the Middle Ages, and then offers a new account of how Slavonic was invented and re-invented in the long ninth century.

Inventing Slavonic in scholarship

It is commonly accepted that the Slavonic alphabet was invented by the Byzantine diplomat Constantine-Cyril at the behest of Rastislav (d. 870), the ruler of Moravia (located roughly between modern day Austria, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic) in the late ninth century (c.862–4); and moreover, that this invention was, in some sense, an extraordinary and disruptive act.³ In the words of the Czech scholar Vladimír Vavřínek, one of the foremost scholars of the invention of Slavonic, in 2017:

The idea [to invent the Slavonic alphabet and translate Scripture] was unprecedented and revolutionary in its implications: it was incomprehensible to his [Constantine-Cyril’s] contemporaries in the West and to his peers in Byzantium, with their arrogant conviction of cultural superiority towards everything non-Hellenic.⁴

More nuanced assessments of Constantine-Cyril as a Byzantine diplomat carrying out the interests of a Byzantine state still consider him ‘completely unique’, for believing that ‘all peoples were worthy of baptism and that all languages were created as equal’, or highly unusual in his ‘spirit of friendliness’.⁵

At the heart of this assumption about uniqueness or revolutionary-ness lies the belief that the invention of the Slavonic alphabet was a liberatory act: it freed Slavs from the ‘arrogant convictions’ of their Byzantine and Western contemporaries. The exact nature of the liberation performed by this act has often been shaped by the contemporary political agendas of Central and Eastern European nation states. At the brink of the collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern bloc, Russian scholar Shiman Palladii narrated this liberation as follows:

In the history of common Slavonic culture, the great and noble deed of the saints Cyril and Methodios does not have an equal in the force of [its] faith, the greatness of [its] effort and [its] significance to the fate of Slavonic enlightenment and unity.⁶

For Palladii, the technological drive of the alphabet cannot be conceived of separately from the ethnic group of the Slavs, whom it unites and enlightens. The two are always already intertwined. This focus on Slavonic unity feeds into a long tradition of Russian pan-Slavic thinking, and its new, more muted, iteration reflected in the Soviet

³ The exact location of medieval Moravia is contested. For a summary, see Maddalena Betti, *The Making of Christian Moravia (858–882): Papal Power and Political Reality* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 9–40.

⁴ Vladimír Vavřínek, ‘The Puzzle of the Cyrillo-Methodian Mission’, *Byzantinoslavica* 75 (2017): 70–98 (78). See also Vladimír Vavřínek, *Staroslověnské životy Konstantina a Metoděje* [in Czech: *The Old Slavonic Lives of Constantine and Methodios*] (Prague: Nakl. ČSAV, 1963), 81.

⁵ Sergei Ivanov, ‘Cyril and Methodios among Byzantine Missionaries: Common Features and Unique Reality’, in *Cyril and Methodios Mission and Europe*, ed. Kouřil, 201; Ihor Ševčenko, ‘Three Paradoxes of the Cyrillo-Methodian Mission’, *Slavic Review* 23 (1964): 220–36 (226).

⁶ Shiman Paladii, ‘Sviatoi ravnoapostol’nyi Mefodii, pervouchitel’ slavian i ego kul’turnaia rol’ v prosveshenii Rosii’ [in Russian: ‘The Holy Apostle Methodios, First Teacher of the Slavs, and His Cultural Role in the Enlightenment of Russia’], in *Mezhdunaroden Simpozium 1100 godini ot blazhenata konchina na Sv. Metodii*, vol. 2, eds. Nikolai Shivarov and Nikolai Kochev (Sofia: Dukhovna akademiia ‘Sv. Kliment Okhridski’, 1989), 110.

Union's attempts to strengthen political bonds in the region over the course of the twentieth century.⁷

More recently, scholars have been less prone to such grand statements, as they have been less prone to writing grand narrative histories of the invention of Slavonic more generally. The earlier such accounts by prominent scholars of the twentieth century serve instead as the spines upon which more specific studies of the philology of the early sources, and their historicity, can be added.⁸ But occasional statements in more recent work reveal how the liberatory power of the invention of the Slavonic alphabet in the ninth century continues to be recast to accommodate contemporary political discourses. In the words of Svetlina Nikolova:

Their [Cyril and Methodios'] work is an attempt to get centuries ahead of their time because they adhered to the principles that were gradually adopted on our continent, starting from the renaissance and the enlightenment right up until the twentieth century. Foremost among these principles is their firm belief that every nation has the right to freely develop its own culture in its own modern language.⁹

From the 1989 Slavonic internationalism of Paladii, the alphabet is recast into the twenty-first-century European nationalism of Nikolova. There is no doubt in either study, however, that the alphabet is inseparably tied to the Slavs, whether they be an international ethnos or a state-bound nation, and due to this tie, that the Slavonic alphabet remains a resource for the liberation for Slavonic culture.

Inventing writing in literacy studies

As presented in the introduction, the study of the invention of Slavonic has remained separate from developments in literacy studies. Nonetheless, it is worth situating the kinds of assumptions being made in the scholarship on Slavonic within this field, because every historical discourse about literacy has within it a full-blown theory of writing. And so long as this remains only implicit, it also remains unexamined.

The major methodological development in the study of writing systems to come in the last few decades has been the shift away from an earlier so-called 'autonomous model of literacy'. This model, propagated in the early work of Jack Goody and Walter Ong, and implemented by historians such as Elizabeth Eisenstein, saw the technology of writing as

⁷ See, for instance, George C. Guins, "The Prospects of "Pan-Slavism"", *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 9 (1950): 439–44.

⁸ The more canonical narrative accounts can be found in: František Grivec, *Slovanska apostola Sv. Ciril i Metod* [in Slovenian: The Slavonic Apostles Cyril and Methodios] (Ljubljana: Izdalo Apostolstvo Sv. Cirila in Metoda, 1927); Viktor Alexandrovich Istrin, *1100 Let slavianskoi azbuki: 863–1963* [in Russian: *1100 Years of the Slavonic Alphabet*] (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1963); Francis Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions Amongst the Slavs, SS Constantine and Methodius* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1970); Boniu Angelov, *Kiril i Metodii: slavianski i bulgarski prosvetiteli* [in Bulgarian: *Constantine and Methodios: Enlighteners of the Slavs and Bulgarians*] (Sofia: Narodna Prosveta, 1977); Boris Floria, *Skazaniia o nachale slavianskoi pis'mennosti* [in Russian: Sources Concerning the Beginning of Slavonic Literacy] (Moscow: Nauka, 1981). For a flavour of the kind of more recent studies, Petr Balcárek, 'Some Remarks to the Response to Iconoclasm in the Old Slavonic *Vita Constantini*', *Studia Patristica*, 48 (2010): 355–9; Iurii Mogarichev, 'K voprosu o prebyvanii Konstantina Filosofa v Krymu' [in Russian: 'On the Question of Constantine the Philosopher's Stay in Crimea'], in his ed., *Problemy istorii i arkhologii Ukrainy: materialy X mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii, posviashchennoi 125-letiiu professora K.E. Grinevicha, 4–5 noiabria 2016 goda* (Kharkiv: OOO 'NTMT', 2016).

⁹ Svetlina Nikolova, 'The Moravian Mission – A Successful and an Unsuccessful Result of the Activity of Sts Cyril and Methodios', in *Kyrillos kai Methodios*, ed. Tachiaos, 69–86 (74).

an independent driver of profound social change.¹⁰ More recent scholarship, however, has turned toward an ‘ideological model of literacy’ which sees literacy as the product of social practices within power structures.¹¹

It is clear at first glance that the scholarship on Slavonic sits somewhere in between. Scholars are certain that the very act of invention was revolutionary and enlightening, and thus that the technology has revolutionary capabilities. Yet these capabilities are only realised because of the association of the alphabet with, in their eyes, a coherent ethnic group of Slavs who are to be liberated from their illiteracy, from Byzantium and from the West. This latter fact means that scholars of Slavonic do partially integrate writing within the realities of social hierarchies, bringing them closer to the ‘ideological’ than to the ‘autonomous’ model of literacy.

But there is a problem with only integrating writing into social reality insofar as it pertains to clearly ethnically distinct social groups, ‘Slavs’ and ‘non-Slavs’. It assumes the coherence and self-consciousness of Slavonic-speakers in the past as ‘Slavs’ and erases a range of variables and liminalities of identity such as bi- or multi-lingualism. In so doing, it gives uncritical primacy to that category of self-identification as the guiding principle of behaviour of Slavonic speakers – that speaking Slavonic makes one a Slav, and that being a Slav trumped being a Christian, a subject of the Moravian or Bulgarian ruler or indeed, being an elite, a cleric or a peasant.

The Slavonic alphabet and the narrative of its eventual spread have remained only partially integrated into social praxis. Its success has been seen as the success of Slavonic peoples in maintaining their new independence and any difficulties or failures have been reduced to assaults on Slavonic autonomy. This is perhaps best illustrated by French Slavist Roger Bernard in a speech in Paris in 1964 and later, due to the agreeability of its sentiment, translated and published in a Bulgarian publication. He notes, that since the Slavonic alphabet was expelled from Moravia and arrived in the Balkans at the turn of the tenth century, we must thank the medieval Bulgarian polity for having ‘preserved and fuelled the flame, which the two brothers [Cyril and Methodios] lit, in order to pass this flame later onto the other Slavonic peoples and to future generations’.¹² Thus, it is taken as a given that there is only one Slavonic literacy for one group of self-conscious Slavonic speakers, and there can only be one history of this literacy, namely: the history of the perseverance of this flame against all non-Slavonic odds to be passed on to other Slavonic peoples. There is no comparable scholarship of Romance or Germanic unity or any kind of ethnic preservation of the flame of writing in the study of literacy in Western Europe, where studies of writing and the vernacular

¹⁰ Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); and in slightly weakened form in his later *The Interface between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1988); Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communication and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

¹¹ Brian Street, ‘Introduction: The New Literacy Studies’, in *Cross-Cultural Approaches to Literacy*, ed. Brian Street (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1–21; Stephen Houston, ‘Overture to The First Writing’ in *The First Writing: Script Invention as History and Process*, ed. Stephen Houston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 5–7.

¹² Roger Bernard, ‘Velikani na dukha’ [in Bulgarian: ‘Giants in Spirit’], in *Bulgaristika i Bulgaristi: statii i izsledvaniia, bulgaristikata v chuzhbina, portreti na bulgaristi*, eds. B. Kastelov and V. Simeonov (Sofia: Nauka i izkustvo, 1981), 25–33.

have focused more on untangling the Church and state than one ethnic group from another.¹³

But what would the history of the Slavonic alphabet in the long ninth century look like if we approach its invention through the lens of the ideological model of literacy? More specifically, what would this history look like, if we consider the attachment between the Slavonic alphabet and the Slavonic language and peoples not as an a priori fact, but as a socially embedded historical process? In what follows I offer a short precis of a new narrative of the invention of Slavonic and its relationship to the Slavonic people.

Inventing Slavonic in the long ninth century

The starting point of this methodological repositioning is to accept that in a world where the technology of writing is already available, as was the case in the late ninth century, it is by no means easy to get a new script off the ground. Outside of the sociopolitical actors and institutions which could promote or hinder it, an alphabet is an empty signifier. For its success, a new script requires the co-operation of groups, individuals and institutions with otherwise conflicting agendas. But there is no guarantee of success: no language requires its own alphabet. No alphabet is inherently ethno-specific, nor always already associated solely with one ethnic group and not another. Today, Slavonic languages are written in a modified Latin script in Croatia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, whilst during the Soviet period non-Slavonic languages like Uzbek, Turkmen and Tajik were written using a modified Slavonic script. Tajik, a variety of Persian, continues to be written in Cyrillic today. Thus, the contemporary exclusivity, to be found in scholarship, of the relationship between the Slavonic alphabet and the Slavonic language, and the Slavonic language and a Slavonic ethnos or people in the ninth century is not a prerequisite fact, but the product of a historical process.

In what follows, I follow the historian of medieval Japan, David Lurie, who notes that ‘writing is never invented only once, as it is repeatedly reconceptualised and reorganised when it is adopted and adapted for different purposes.’¹⁴ I argue that between the first account of the alphabet’s creation, found in the *Life of Constantine-Cyril* (c.867–70) and the second account found in the *Life of Methodios* (c.880s) the Slavonic alphabet was reinvented, and reconceptualised in profound ways. One key tenet of this transformation on which I will focus in this article is the emergent centrality of the ethnicisation of the alphabet, its attachment to the Slavonic peoples. This only truly emerges in the *Life of Methodios*, in the later ninth century, and under the specific needs and limitations posed by the intellectual world of the Latin churches.

More generally, it is my contention that this mono-ethnicisation was a product of specific contemporary sociopolitical circumstances at the crossroads of papal and Carolingian ecclesiastical authority in Central Europe. These were circumstances in which,

¹³ Beginning with Michael Clanchy’s seminal *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066–1307* (London: Edward Arnold, 1979), such studies have more recently been branded as studies of ‘pragmatic literacy’. Inger Larsson, *Pragmatic Literacy and the Medieval Use of the Vernacular: The Swedish Example* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009); Đorđe Bubalo, *Pragmatic Literacy in Medieval Serbia* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014).

¹⁴ David Lurie, ‘Parables of Inscription: Some Notes on the Narratives of the Origin of Writing’, *History and Theory* 56 (2018): 48–9.

more often than not, ‘the Slavs’ themselves were only of secondary importance to the authors of our texts.

Inventing Slavonic: a Byzantine idea

The earliest accounts of the invention of the Slavonic alphabet are in the hagiographic *Life of Constantine-Cyril* (henceforth *VC*), its inventor, and the *Life of Methodios* (henceforth *VM*), his brother-cum-companion.¹⁵ On the basis of textual and intertextual evidence these texts have been dated to the late ninth century, within no more than a few decades of the deaths of their eponymous protagonists, sometime between 869 (when Cyril died) and 885 (when Methodios died) for the *VC*, and between 885 and 907 (when the region of Moravia was overrun by Hungarian invasion) at the latest for the *VM*.

The texts’ earliest attestations come in much later manuscripts, respectively from the fifteenth and thirteenth centuries, but their contents remain surprisingly stable across their transmission.¹⁶ Their immense significance has resulted in over a century of close philological study identifying linguistic archaisms and so-called Moravianisms, or central European specific formations of Slavonic morphology. This has rendered any further attempts to challenge the texts’ authenticity futile.¹⁷ Although historians have often mistakenly conflated challenges to the texts’ authenticity with challenges to their accuracy or historicity, these ought to remain separate questions.¹⁸

The very first account of the invention of Slavonic is to be found in a Byzantine-style hagiographic text, which was probably originally written in Greek, and later translated into Slavonic.¹⁹ As has been argued, the *VC* clearly promotes Byzantine imperialism.²⁰ The ‘we’ in the text are the Romans, as Byzantines referred to themselves, and everyone else, Slavs, Muslims and Jews, are othered and caricatured.²¹ This is not, although it is often painted as such, a text ‘imbued with Slavonic patriotism’.²² Moreover, the majority of the text is not concerned with the alphabet but rather with Constantine-Cyril’s

¹⁵ For the *Life of Constantine-Cyril* (*VC*) I have used the editions found in: František Grivec and France Tomšič, eds., *Constantinus et Methodius Thessalonicensis. Fontes* (Zagreb: Radovi Staroslavenskog instituta, 1960), 95–143, and Kliment Okhridski, *Subrani Suchineniia* [in Bulgarian: *Collected Essays*], vol. 3, eds. Boniu Angelov and Khristo Kodov (Sofia: Izdatelstvo na Bulgarskata akademiiia na naukite, 1973), 30–159. For the *Life of Methodios* (*VM*), Grivec and Tomšič, *Constantinus et Methodius*, 145–67; Kliment, *Subrani*, 185–92. The paragraph numbers I give are found in both editions, the line numbers are only found in the former, by Grivec and Tomšič. All translations into English are my own.

¹⁶ Kliment, *Subrani*, 34, 161–2.

¹⁷ Floria, *Skazaniia*, 6–7.

¹⁸ For instance, Betti, *Making of Christian Moravia*, 89.

¹⁹ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the original language of the text is also a matter of great contention. A Greek or partially Greek original was argued for by André Vaillant, *Textes vieux-slaves*, vol. 2 (Paris: Institut d’études slaves, 1968), 25; Ricardo Picchio, ‘Compilazione e trama narrativa nelle “Vite” di Costantino e Metodio’, *Ricerche Slavistiche* 8 (1960): 61–95. More recently this was bolstered by the discovery that an early church service in honour of Constantine-Cyril was originally written in Greek: Sergei Temchin, ‘O grecheskom proiskhozhdenii drevneishei sluzhby Kirillu Filosoфу’ [in Russian: ‘On the Greek source of the Oldest Service for Cyril the Philosopher’], in *Liturgische Hymnen nach byzantinischem Ritus bei den Slaven in ältester Zeit*, eds. Hans Rothe and Dagmar Christians (Paderborn: F. Schöningh, 2007), 328–39.

²⁰ Ihor Ševčenko, ‘Religious Missions Seen from Byzantium’, *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 12–13 (1988–9): 7–27 (13). Milton Anastos, ‘Political Theory in the Lives of the Slavic Saints Constantine and Methodios’, *Harvard Slavic Studies* 2 (1954): 11–38.

²¹ e.g. *VC*, 6.57; 14.16.

²² Dmitry Obolensky, ‘Father Francis Dvornik’, *Harvard Slavic Studies* 2 (1954): 1–10 (5).

diplomatic travels as imperial agent.²³ Given this context, what little attention the alphabet receives, places its ethnic particularity second to its instrumental role in affirming Byzantine or Roman supremacy. Here is how the text renders the Moravian ruler Rastislav's request for the alphabet from the Byzantine Emperor Michael III (842–67):

Our people have turned away from paganism, and abide by Christian law, yet we do not have such a teacher, who would tell us the true Christian faith in our language, in order that other countries having seen us would imitate us. So send us, ruler, such a bishop and teacher, for it is from you that good law is given to all regions.²⁴

The VC focuses first and foremost on the act of conversion, and thus on the agency of empires rather than alphabets. The alphabet emerges from a generic act of imperial missionary work: 'it is from you that all good law [i.e. Christian law] is given to all regions.' Insofar as Rastislav is concerned with writing, he asks simply for vernacular preaching, neither specifying that it needs to be in a designated alphabet, nor specifying the particular language required. It is telling that the whole episode does not name the language of the letters. Rastislav is described as a 'ruler of the Moravians' (*Morav'sky knez*) rather than the Slavs, and the account of the invention and arrival of the alphabet in Moravia does not term the alphabet Slavonic.²⁵ It is not until Cyril's arrival in Pannonia, south of Moravia, that the books he is translating are specified as 'Slavonic',²⁶ and it is not until the Venetian debate that the letters are referred to as being created 'for the Slavs' by the Latin priests, not by Cyril himself.²⁷ That is not to say that Cyril did not preach in Slavonic, or that Rastislav did not speak Slavonic. What is clear, however, is that this ethnicisation was not of primary significance for the author and argument of the VC. Thus, in the VC, the alphabet is presented as just another feather to this pious philosopher's cap, and just another pearl upon the Byzantine imperial crown in its commitment to spreading the faith: this is, in short, a Byzantine manifesto for missionary work, rather than a defence of vernacular Slavonic literacy.²⁸

Neither the alphabet nor this early narrative of its invention occurred in a vacuum. This formulation of the alphabet is best understood within the contemporary forces of the Byzantine intellectual sphere. After the resolution of the Iconoclast controversy in 843, the Constantinopolitan centre began to look outward, successfully converting the neighbouring Bulgarian polity from the 860s onwards, trying to convert the Khazars in the north Caucasus with less success (c.861), and agreeing, at least according to the VC, to send teachers to Moravia (c.864).

With this came intellectual production concerned with mission. Both the view that it was necessary and the view that it was futile to put 'pearls before swine' can be found in the output of the ninth-century Byzantine elite. But as Sergei Ivanov has shown, the

²³ Of the 20 pages in an A4 edition, only two deal with the alphabet and Moravia. Kliment Okhridski, *Subrani*, 104–5; VC, 14–15.

²⁴ 'людемъ нашимъ поган'ства се сзтврѣг'шимъ и по христ'ян'скыи се законъ дръжешемъ, оучителя не имамы такого, иже ни бы въ свои языкъ истоую вѣрѣ христ'ян'скѣю сказаль, да се быше и ины страны зреще подобили намъ. То послѣ ны, владыко, епископа и оучителя такого, сътѣ васъ бо на в'се страны добръ законъ исходитъ': VC, 14.3–5.

²⁵ VC, 14.

²⁶ VC, 15.18–19.

²⁷ VC, 16.2.

²⁸ For an in-depth textual analysis of the *Life of Constantine-Cyril* and exposition of its major arguments, see Mirela Ivanova, 'Re-Thinking the Life of Constantine-Cyril', *Slavonic and East European Review*, 98 (2020): 434–63.

argument for missionary work was gaining strength and became even more tangible in the tenth century.²⁹ Situated within the ninth-century Byzantine thought from which it emerged, the VC's representation of the Slavonic alphabet is very different to the invention of Slavonic found in scholarship today. It is framed not as a sign of Slavonic liberation, but rather as a symbol of Byzantine intellectual and religious hegemony.

Neither performing liturgy in other languages, nor recording in other alphabets, is particularly remarkable to the Byzantines, contrary to the statements of Vavřínek quoted earlier. Even if there were those who thought Greek superior to other languages, liturgy in other alphabets and in other languages was a matter of fact, not a matter of contention. In the words of Constantine-Cyril himself:

... for we know peoples who have knowledge of books and praise God each in their own language. It is known that these are: Armenians, Persians, Abkhazians, Georgians, Sogdian Goths and Avars, Turks, Khazars, Arabs, Egyptians and many others.³⁰

Some of these peoples shared alphabets: by the ninth century Coptic was written in Greek letters, Persian in Arabic script. Others had their own like the Armenians and Georgians. In short, insofar as the Byzantine author of the VC thought about the alphabet, they saw it simply as a vehicle for Byzantine missionary expansion. Such was the outlook sometime in the 870s shortly after Cyril's death in Rome, where the text was most probably written. At his death, the text notes, Cyril was celebrated by 'all the Greeks and Romans' of Rome: he was not, yet, an apostle to the Slavs.

(Re-)Inventing Slavonic: a Latin Church

Whatever it was that the author of the VC was trying to *do* in portraying Cyril and the alphabet as they did, it was done through and for Byzantine intellectual culture. Yet, the VC never made it back into Byzantine intellectual culture, and no mention of Cyril or his brother survives in Greek sources: no hymns, no homilies, no *vitae*. Their efforts, therefore, were, in the end, unsuccessful. The institutional forces required for the sustenance of this version of the Slavonic alphabet and its origin narrative did not align. But the arrival of this alphabet with its philosopher inventor in Rome in the late 860s had consequences clearly not anticipated by the author of the VC.

The exact specifics of what happened immediately after the death of Cyril remain unclear due to contradictory accounts in our sources. Most concretely, a letter by Pope John VIII dated to 879 reveals that Pope Hadrian II sent Methodios, Cyril's brother, to Moravia either as priest first and later bishop, or directly as bishop, sometime between 869 and 872 and that the Slavonic alphabet was in use by him there.³¹ Thus, Methodios, the inheritor of the Slavonic letters, became a papally appointed bishop and the script's use was henceforth hosted by the Latin Church as an institution. As a result, a new origin story was written, reinventing the alphabet and its purpose, to be

²⁹ Sergei Ivanov, "Pearls before Swine": *Missionary Work in Byzantium*, trans. Deborah Hoffman (Paris: ACHCByz, 2015), 89–90.

³⁰ '... мы же роды знаємъ книги оумѣюще и богу славу въздающе своимъ языкомъ къждо. Явѣ же соут сїи: армени, пер'си, аваз'гы, ивери, соуғ'ди годи, вбри, тѣрси, козари, ааравляне, егуп'ти и инїи мнѣзы': VC, 16.7.

³¹ John VIII, Letter 200, in 'Registrum Iohannis VIII. papae', ed. Erich Caspar, in *Epistolae Karolini aevi* (V), eds. Erich Caspar and others. *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Epistolae* 7. 2nd edn. (Berlin: Weidmann, 1974), 1–272 (160).

found in the *VM*. This break has remained largely ignored by scholarship, as the brothers are ubiquitously celebrated as one unit.

The *VM* radically rewrites the invention of Slavonic and its circumstances. Both the letters and the actors involved in their creation are heavily and explicitly ethnicised in the text, an ethnicisation altogether lacking in the *VC*. Rastislav is no longer rendered ‘ruler of the Moravians’, as in the *VC*, but rather specifically a ‘ruler of the Slavs’ (*kniaz slovien’sku*).³² His request to Michael in the *VM*, this time made together with his successor Sviatopluk, is no longer based on Byzantine law giving, but rather on a specified ethnicity.

Since we are steady in the mercy of God, there have come to us many Christian teachers from the Vlachs, from the Greeks and from the Germans, teaching us different [things], but we, the Slavs, are simple children and we do not have someone who would lead us to truth and would give us understanding. So, good ruler, send us such a man, who would make right every right!³³

It is clear in the *VM*, that there has been a profound change in positionality: this is not a text propagating Byzantine imperialism. The ethnic disambiguation of Christian teachers specifically names the Byzantines as unsuitable for this mission. Moreover, it does not call them Romans, as they would call themselves, and as the *VC* calls them, but ‘Greeks’, as Latin Christians would derogatorily refer to them. But it is not just the Greeks that are excluded from this missionary act, so too are the ‘Germans’, namely the East Frankish kingdom, whose bishops had undertaken the Christianisation of the region since the collapse of the Avar khaganate. Their claims to Roman-ness are also diminished, reduced once again to their language group rather than imperial ambitions. This is a text, in short, profoundly concerned with ethnicising language speakers, and making ethnic labels language based. Rastislav’s request in the *VM*, even though writing to a Byzantine emperor, is made essentially to exclude Byzantine and Frankish missionary activity, and to necessitate someone who knows Slavonic specifically, and the Slavs as people.

Of course, rewriting the invention of Slavonic in this way posed problems. By its own textual logic, Constantine-Cyril and Methodios were, after all, ‘Greeks’, and the author of the *VM* has to make concerted efforts to dilute this identity. When the emperor sends Constantine-Cyril to Moravia in the *VC*, he tells him simply that he must go, for the generic reason that ‘no one else can carry this out like you.’³⁴ In the *VM* by contrast, as the request from Rastislav is ethnicised, so too is the emperor’s reason for sending Constantine-Cyril and his brother. The emperor insists that he must send them, because they are from Thessaloniki and in Thessaloniki ‘everyone speaks Slavonic clearly’.³⁵ The *VM* goes even further with Methodios, to whom it claims, the emperor gave the rule over an ambiguous Slavonic ‘lordship’ (*kniazhenie*). He does this,

³² *VM*, 5.1.

³³ ‘яко божиною милостию съдрави ѱсмь и соуць въ ны вышьли оучители мнози кръстияни из Влахъ и из Грькъ и из Нъмьць оучаще ны различь, а мы Словѣни проста чадь и не имамъ, иже бы наставилъ на истинуоу и разоумь съказаль. То добръи владыко, посъли такъ моужь, иже ны испрвить въсакоу правдоу’: *VM*, 5.2–3.

³⁴ ‘не можеть инь никтоже исправити якоже ты’: *VC*, 14.8.

³⁵ ‘всьи чисто словѣньскы бесѣдоуютъ’: *VM*, 5.1–8.

... as if he prophesied he was going to send [Methodios] as a teacher to the Slavs and first archbishop, in order that he had studied all the Slavonic customs and began to become accustomed to them [the Slavs] little by little.³⁶

Thus, the *VM* produces a new, ethnicised, invention of the Slavonic alphabet, in which the letters become exclusively attached to Slavonic speakers. They are no longer the product of a generous act of imperial missionary work undertaken by the Roman state. Rather, the letters are now presented as the product of a mission invited by a 'ruler of the Slavs', asking for Slavs and not Germans or Greeks, and therefore performed by people who 'speak Slavonic clearly', one of whom had himself ruled over Slavs elsewhere and learned to understand and be accustomed to them.

Whilst this new ethnicised invention of the alphabet is closer to contemporary historiographical discourse than that found in the *VC*, there are still profound differences. Because, whilst the *VM* may be *about* the Slavs much more than the life of his brother, the *VM* is still not written *for* the Slavs. Rather, the text and its decision to focus on ethnicising the alphabet is best understood within the contemporary socio-political sphere which occasioned this act of writing.

Upon their arrival in Moravia and Pannonia both Methodios, as papally anointed bishop, and the Slavonic letters took centre stage in an ongoing debate concerning the episcopal jurisdiction of the formerly Avar lands on the eastern frontier of Louis the German's kingdom. The lands visited by the brothers, Moravia and Pannonia, were granted to local rulers by Frankish kings. But the Frankish kings of the ninth century considered these territories as their own to convert and administer.³⁷ This was at odds with the ninth-century papacy, however. In Rome, concerted efforts led by Pope Nicholas I (858–67), Pope Hadrian II (867–72) and Pope John VIII (872–82) sought to 'restore' a constructed image of the papacy as an active missionary institution.³⁸

The opportunity offered by the alphabet for a papally appointed bishop in an otherwise Frankish-dominated region was not missed by Hadrian II, nor by John VIII. Evidence shows the latter, in particular, defended Methodios by threatening major Frankish bishops with excommunication after they had him imprisoned for two years.³⁹ Temporary institutional discord between the Franks and the papacy thus resulted in papal support for the Slavonic-speaking bishopric. But this support was always fragile and tentative, and between 879 and 880 John VIII himself changed his mind on whether the Gospel could be read in Slavonic during Mass but after readings in Latin or Greek were delivered, or whether only homilies and sermons might be given in Slavonic.⁴⁰ More general instability within the papacy was rife after the assassination of John VIII

³⁶ 'яко прозьра, како и хоташе оучителя Словѣниемъ посълати и първаго архиепискоупа, да бы прооучиль са вьсьмъ обычаемъ Словѣньскимъ и обыкъ я по малю': *VM*, 2.5.

³⁷ Helmut Reimitz, 'Conversion and Control: The Establishment of Liturgical Frontiers in Carolingian Panonnia', in *The Transformation of Frontiers. From Late Antiquity to the Carolingians*, eds. Walter Pohl, Ian Wood and Helmut Reimitz (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 188–207; Ian N. Wood, *The Missionary Life: Saints and the Evangelisation of Europe, 400–1500* (Harlow: Longman, 2001), 85–90, especially 90.

³⁸ See Conrad Leyser, 'The Memory of Gregory the Great and the Making of Latin Europe, 600–1000', in *Making Early Medieval Societies: Conflict and Belonging in the Latin West, 300–1200*, eds. Kate Cooper and Conrad Leyser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 181–201.

³⁹ John VIII, Fragmentary letters 21–3, in 'Fragmenta registri Iohannis VIII. papae', ed. Erich Caspar, in *Epistolae Karolini aevi* (V), eds. Caspar and others, 273–312 (284–6).

⁴⁰ John VIII, Letter 255, in 'Registrum Iohannis VIII. papae', ed. Caspar, 223, versus a year earlier, Letter 200, in 'Registrum Iohannis VIII. papae', ed. Caspar, 160.

in 882. Pope Stephen V (885–91) was the third pope since John to sit on the throne by 890, when he explicitly banned the use of Slavonic and, in another act of reconciliation with the Frankish Church, confirmed that the papacy had no theological issue with their position on the *filioque*.⁴¹ A year later, the papal throne changed hands again, this time to John VIII's long-standing opponent Formosus (891–6). It seems most probable that the *VM* was written around this ban in 890 and time of general insecurity and, I argue, that it explicitly sought to restore papal patronage over Moravia and Pannonia.⁴²

The clerical elite of Moravia and Pannonia was seeking to secure their institutional stability. But they did not have a strong case for their independence from the East Frankish Church. This is clearly shown by the *Conversion of the Bavarians and the Carantanians*, compiled by the archbishopric of Salzburg in 870, explicitly in light of Methodios' arrival.⁴³ It demonstrates that at least in Pannonia, on which it focuses, Frankish overlordship and Frankish missionary work had been the norm since the eighth century. The case is supported by tedious lists of churches consecrated and priests appointed under Salzburg's oversight.⁴⁴

Faced with the reality of historic Frankish control, the author of the *VM* turned to the language of ethnic specificity, and focused on the alphabet, the key distinguishing factor between the Methodian milieu and its Latin predecessors in the region. In a forged letter in the *VM*, Pope Hadrian II supposedly sends Methodios not to the local ruler of Pannonia, Kočel, nor to any specific see, but 'to all those lands of the Slavs'.⁴⁵ The assumption that an ethnos needs its own ethnic church, and that this may not align with contemporary political divisions, was not invented anew, however. In propagating it, the *VM* is emulating the rhetoric of earlier papally sanctioned missionary activity. An ethnic church is envisaged in the register of Pope Gregory the Great, which was still circulating widely in the ninth century.⁴⁶ The mission of Augustine was not to any particular Anglo-Saxon kingdom or political configuration, but rather to the English people (*gens Anglorum*).⁴⁷ Just as the *VM* describes Rastislav not as ruler of Moravia (as the *VC* does) but ruler of the Slavs (*kniaz sloviensk'ŭ*), Gregory addresses Bertha, not as queen of Kent, but of the English (*regina Anglorum*).⁴⁸ Likewise, in Willibald's *Life of Boniface*, the eponymous saint is sent by the pope, not to any kingdom, but rather to 'report on the savage people of Germany'.⁴⁹ This text, too, was available in the ninth century.⁵⁰

⁴¹ The papal position on the *filioque* had up until then been rather ambivalent. Betti, *Making of Christian Moravia*, 46; Stephen V, Letter 33, in 'Fragmenta registri Stephani V. papae', ed. Erich Caspar, in *Epistolae Karolini Aevi (V)*, eds. Caspar and others, 334–53 (352–3).

⁴² This is commonly accepted: e.g. Floria, *Skazaniia*, 85–6.

⁴³ Fritz Lošek, ed. and trans., *Die Conversio Bagoariorum et Carantanorum und der Brief des Erzbischofs Theotmar von Salzburg* (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1997); Wood, *Missionary Life*, 172–3; Herwig Wolfram, 'The Bavarian Mission to Pannonia in the 9th Century', in *Cyril and Methodius Mission and Europe*, ed. Kouřil, 28–33 (29).

⁴⁴ Lošek, ed., *Die Conversio*, 11, 13.

⁴⁵ 'НЪ ВСѢМЪ СТРАНАМЪ ТѢМЪ СЛОВѢНСКИМЪ': *VM*, 8.2.

⁴⁶ On circulation, see Leyser, 'Memory of Gregory the Great'.

⁴⁷ e.g. Gregory the Great, Letter VI.49, in Paul Edward and Ludo Hartmann, eds., *Gregorii I papae Registrum epistolarum*. Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Epistolae 1–2 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1887–99), 1: 42; see John R.C. Martyn, trans., *The Letters of Gregory the Great* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2004).

⁴⁸ Gregory the Great, Letter XI.35, in *Registrum epistolarum*, eds. Edward and Hartmann, 2: 304.

⁴⁹ 'ad inspicieudos inmanissimos Germaniae populos': Willibald, *Life of Boniface*, in *Vita Bonifatii auctore Willibaldo*, ed. Wilhelm Levison. Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Germanicarum 57 (Hanover: Hahn, 1905), 22 (5).

⁵⁰ In Levison's edition a number of ninth-century copies survive, including one from Bavaria (Codex Monacensis, Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cml 1086), not far from the eastern frontier. It is also possible the Moravian

To secure its own institutional continuity, the textual community which produced the *VM* rewrote the invention of Slavonic and essentialised and caricatured Slavonic speakers and their ruler Sviatopluk. The *VM* presents Slavonic speakers' support for the alphabet, and for Methodios, as unequivocal, and instrumentalises this support to secure the succession of Gorazd, a Slavonic speaker, to the Methodian bishopric instead of his Latinate opponent Witching. Yet, this ethnic enthusiasm is contradicted by the papal materials which reveal that, as ever, political action is not reducible to personal ethnic identity or language practice. A letter from John VIII makes clear that, Slavonic speaker or not, Sviatopluk seems to have preferred that Wiching be made bishop upon Methodios' death.⁵¹ Moreover, evidence for the enthusiastic local adoption and use of Slavonic in Moravia and Pannonia remains scarce. There survive no manuscripts which we can safely locate to the region and to the late ninth century, and aside from bottle shards with four individual Slavonic letters on them discovered in 2009, there are no surviving graffiti or inscriptions in Slavonic from the region from the ninth and tenth centuries.⁵²

In the end, therefore, the institutional and individual forces required to sustain a Slavonic-speaking bishopric in the region did not align. The early history of the alphabet and its use is not one of liberation, but of fragility. It was from this fragility that the alphabet's ethnicisation was born. This study of the *VM* has sought to illuminate the community which produced the text, namely: a clerical elite in central Europe desperately trying to clutch onto the patronage of a wavering papal court through the composition of a new history of the invention of Slavonic. Faced with contemporary legalistic claims to their land, they turned to an older model of papal missionary work to justify their existence, casting Moravia and Pannonia as 'lands of the Slavs', needful of, and enthusiastic for, their own ethnic, Slavonic Church and thus exclusively attached to the Slavonic alphabet. Despite evidence against the reality of this ethnic enthusiasm, the Slavs' support for the Slavonic alphabet has been accepted throughout scholarship as an unfaltering given to be celebrated. This assumption requires profound reconsideration.

Conclusions

This article has sought to do two things. The first is to identify the assumptions made about the drivers of literacy in scholarship on Slavonic, and to situate them within the wider field of literacy studies. It has shown that scholarship on the alphabet has considered its ethnic specificity as central to its success. And, moreover, that this ethno-driven model falls somewhere between the two major ways of approaching the growth of writing: namely the autonomous and ideological models of literacy.

Secondly, I have proposed a re-reading of this alphabetic ethnicisation, emerging from a fully ideological model of literacy, where writing is, as far as our sources permit,

milieu had access to these kinds of texts directly from the papacy. See Levison, ed., *Vita Bonifatii*, xviii–xxvii, especially nos. 1, 2a, 3 and 6.

⁵¹ John VIII, Letter 255, in 'Registrum Iohannis VIII. papae', ed. Caspar, 223; discussed in Wood, *Missionary Life*, 175.

⁵² Currently the shards are on display in Budapest, in the National Museum of Hungary. Béla Miklós Szóke, 'Mosa-burg/Zalavár und Pannonien in der Karolingerzeit', *Antaeus*, 31, no. 2 (2010): 49–52. Contrast this with the only partially published large corpus of inscribed stone and metal from the tenth-century Balkans, where the alphabet arrived next: Kazimir Popkonstantinov and Otto Kronsteiner, eds., *Altbulgarische Inschriften*, vol. 1, (Salzburg: Institut für Slawistik der Universität Salzburg, 1994).

integrated into wider sociopolitical and intellectual praxis. I have argued that the ethno-driven model found in scholarship does emerge from our early texts, but that it does not emerge from the earliest account of the alphabet's invention. Rather, in its first iteration found in the *VC*, the alphabet's invention and adoption was simply a manifestation of Byzantine imperial power and missionary prowess. Its ethnic particularity was insignificant in this model. It is only with respect to the Methodian bishopric that this invention myth is rewritten in the *VM* and cast in a truly ethicised light. This ethnicisation is not an a priori fact, but the product of the contemporary fragility facing the Methodian milieu. In claiming episcopal authority over the region and appealing to wavering papal patronage, the *VM* and its textual community cast Moravia and Pannonia in the language of earlier, papally sanctioned missions to ethnic peoples rather than specific kingdoms. In so doing, they reduced Slavonic speakers to unequivocal supporters of the alphabet, despite surviving evidence to the contrary.

The idea that the Slavonic alphabet was unequivocally a good thing cannot be taken for granted as it has been in scholarship thus far. The alphabet was only ever as oppressive or liberating as its users and promoters. In the texts which concern this article, it is clear that the narrators of the invention of Slavonic were often more concerned with other urgent social problems than the alphabet itself. Their use of the alphabet was instrumental and ideological. It often flattened or erased the doubtless complex and contradictory actions of Slavonic speakers themselves. Yet, despite the text's reductive account of Slavonic speakers, scholarship has accepted and internalised the ideological agendas of the author of the *VM* for over a hundred years. This article is the start of a thorough reconsideration of the invention of Slavonic in the long ninth century.

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