

The Characters (Χαρακτήρες) of the Glagolitic Alphabet: New Light on an Old Puzzle

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Abstract. The article calls attention to a neglected source for the over-all “look and feel” of the Glagolitic alphabet as it was first created by Constantine the Philosopher *circa* 863 AD. This source is the variant forms of the Greek and other alphabets (including Hebrew and Arabic) that consist of so-called *Brillenbuchstabe* (otherwise *caractères à lunettes* or *ring-letters*). These variant alphabets were employed chiefly for esoteric purposes, including astrological and magical ones. Because of their limited use, they have largely been overlooked in standard handbooks of Greek and Oriental paleography. An interest in such subjects as astrology and magic comports poorly with routine assumptions about the inner lives of Medieval Saints such as Constantine. Relying on the extant primary sources for Constantine’s life, however, the article shows that his education, interests and mystical inclinations make a familiarity with some of these esoteric alphabets virtually certain. Thus it is historically plausible that such alphabets were among the inspirations for the general style, that is, the “look and feel”, of the letters of Constantine’s original glagolitic alphabet. (This article supplements the author’s earlier study from 2014, “A New Reconstruction of the Original Glagolitic Alphabet”.)

Keywords: Glagolitic alphabet, Constantine-Cyrill the Philosopher, ring-letters, Medieval Mysticism

Знаки (Χαρακτήρες) глаголической азбуки: новый взгляд на старую проблему

Аннотация. Статья посвящена малоизвестному источнику общего вида и стиля глаголической азбуки, созданной Константином Философом около 863 г. Таким источником явилась факультативная разновидность греческого и иных алфавитов (в том числе еврейского и арабского), называемая *очковым письмом* (*Brillenbuchstabe*, *caractères à lunettes*, *ring-letters*). Она применялась в основном для эзотерических, в том числе астрологических и магических, целей. Узкая сфера применения этого письма обусловила его отсутствие в обычных пособиях по греческой и восточной палеографии. Интерес к астрологии и магии плохо сочетается с общепринятыми представлениями о внутреннем мире средневековых святых. Тем не менее в статье на сохранившихся первоисточниках, повествующих о жизни Константина, продемонстрировано, что его образование, интересы и мистические наклонности делают практически неизбежным его знакомство с некоторыми видами подобных алфавитов. Исторически вполне вероятно, что именно они послужили источником общего стиля и внешнего вида букв первоначальной глаголической азбуки Константина. (Статья дополняет предыдущую работу автора 2014 года под названием «Новая реконструкция первоначального глаголического алфавита».)

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Ключевые слова: глаголица, Константин-Кирилл Философ, очковое письмо, средневековый мистицизм

Glagolinės abėcėlės ženklai (Χαρακτήρες): sena problema naujoje šviesoje

Santrauka. Straipsnis skiriamas mažai žinomam Konstantino Filosofo apie 863 metus sukurtos glagolinės abėcėlės stiliaus ir bendrojo vaizdo šaltiniui. Juo tapo *akiniuotasis raštas* (vok. *Brillenbuchstabe*, pranc. *caractères à lunettes*, angl. *ring-letters*). Tai graikų ir kai kurių kitų (tarp jų hebrajų ir arabų) rašto fakultatyvi atmaina, dažniausiai naudota ezoteriniais (taip pat astrologiniais ir maginiais) tikslais. Dėl siauros taikymo srities šis rašto tipas nepatenka į standartinius graikų ir apskritai Rytų paleografiškai skirtus darbus. Dėmesys astrologijai ir magijai nelabai dera su mums įprastais įsivaizdavimais apie viduramžių šventųjų vidinį gyvenimą. Straipsnyje pasitelkiant išlikusius pirminius šaltinius apie Konstantino gyvenimą parodyta, kad jo išsilavinimas, interesai ir mistiniai polinkiai leidžia manyti, kad jis tikriausiai pažinojo panašių abėcėlių atmainas. Istorikai labai tikėtina, kad būtent jos tapo Konstantino sukurtos glagolinės abėcėlės stiliaus ir bendrojo vaizdo šaltiniu. (Straipsnis papildoma autorius 2014 m. darba „Nauja pirmą kartą glagolinės abėcėlės rekonstrukcija“.)

Reikšminiai žodžiai: glagolica, Kirilas (Konstantinas) Filosofas, akiniuotasis raštas, viduramžių misticizmas

In memoriam

Francis J. Whitfield

1916–1996

According to Late Antique and Byzantine Greek theorists of language, each *letter* (γράμμα) of an alphabet consists of four things: its written form or *character* (χαρακτήρ), its *name* (ὄνομα), its phonetic value or *power* (δύναμις), and its value as a *numeral* (ἄριθμος). For example, in the Greek alphabet, the eighteenth *letter* has the *character* “Σ”, the *name* “sigma” (σίγμα), roughly the same pronunciation or *power* as the English letter “S”, and the value 200 as a *numeral*¹.

The same was true for almost all other alphabets — Hebrew, Syriac, Coptic, Gothic, Armenian, Georgian and others — known to the Greeks: each letter in each of these alphabets had the same four components: its character, its name, its power, and its value as a numeral.

Some of these alphabets, as the Byzantines knew, were the product of slow evolution over many centuries. Others had been created by individual scholarly translators like Ulfilas (for Gothic) or Mesrop-Maštoc‘ (for Armenian and Georgian) in relatively recent centuries.

¹ For this grammatical theory see the scholiast Melampous on the *Ars Grammatica* of Dionysius Thrax [ed. Hilgard 1901, 30–32; Schmidt 1839, 15–21 (§5)]. Cf. the abbreviated account of the theory by Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae Philosophorum*, VII.56 [ed. Dorandi 2013, 507–508]. As an aside, note that the *Vita Brevis Clementis*, XIV, written in Greek, reflects the same theory when it states with precision that Clement of Ohrid devised “other characters of letters for greater clarity” (χαρακτήρας ἐτέρους γραμμάτων πρὸς τὸ σαφέστερον) than those which Constantine had invented [Milev 1966, 180–181]. For a recent treatment of this obscure passage see [Trunte 2004].

One of these invented alphabets was the Glagolitic alphabet. It was the creation of one man, a very erudite Byzantine scholar and mystic, Constantine the Philosopher, around the year 863 CE. Like the Greek alphabet, and also like most other alphabets known to erudite Byzantines, his new alphabet provided each *letter* with its own proper *character*, *name*, and *power*, and with its own proper value as a *numeral*.

* * *

In contrast to the other invented alphabets known to the Byzantines, it is not easy to reconstruct all the details of Constantine's original alphabet. No two early Glagolitic manuscripts use quite the same inventory of letters, nor is the use of some of these letters wholly consistent from one scribe to the next. The external evidence — abecedaria, alphabetic acrostics, comments about the alphabet in various texts — is also inconsistent, and in some respects even self-contradictory.

In an earlier article I presented my own best attempt at a reconstruction of Constantine's original Glagolitic alphabet in light of these difficulties [Mathiesen 2014]. There I specified the *character* (the written shape), the *name*, the *power* (the pronunciation) and the *numerical value* for each of the thirty-six *letters* of that alphabet. I also laid bare what I remain convinced was the complex — and somewhat impractical — process through which Constantine arrived at the final form of his new alphabet.

One question, however, I left unresolved in that earlier article. On what basis, or according to what model, did Constantine create the *characters* for his thirty-six Glagolitic letters? At that time I had nothing to add to the well-known similarities between individual Glagolitic characters and stray characters from other alphabets known to Constantine².

* * *

By accident, however, I recently happened upon examples of an unexamined class of alphabets which account quite well for the odd “look and feel” of Constantine's Glagolitic characters. In particular, they are an obvious source for the most striking feature of these characters, namely, the way in which the pen-strokes in the characters usually terminate in small circles. At least two-thirds of the thirty-six Glagolitic characters show this feature; only six of these thirty-six characters are wholly composed of straight lines.

To my initial surprise, I found that letter-like characters with this odd feature, and even entire alphabets of such characters, were indeed known to the Greeks from Late Antiquity onward, and also elsewhere in Eastern

² See the standard handbooks of Glagolitic paleography [Jagić 1911; Vajs 1932].

Christendom, as well as among the Jews and the Muslims. However, these characters and alphabets were employed by them only in highly restricted contexts. This is why they have hardly been mentioned in any standard work on Greek paleography. Specialists in the texts in question most often call these characters “eye-glasses letters” (*Brillenbuchstaben*) or “eye-glasses characters” (*caractères à lunettes*) or, less poetically in English, *ring-letters*³.

The texts and manuscripts in which individual ring-letters and ring-letter alphabets occur are esoteric ones: ring-letter alphabets are found in manuscripts containing works on astrology and alchemy on the one hand, and on the other, they abound in magical writings and texts, and are also found inscribed on magical artifacts.

Here I offer two striking examples. My first example is a full alphabet of ring-letters.

Figure 1 reproduces this alphabet as it is found in Codex Vindobonensis philologicus graecus 108, folio 370r. This is a 15th-century manuscript containing astrological and magical texts [Delatte 1927, 634–638; cf. Kroll 1903, 1–16; figure 1 is copied from Delatte 1927, 637]. Here the alphabet is labeled “Solomon’s” [*sc.* alphabet] (του σολομωντος, without accents). It is to be read from right to left, first the lower line, then the upper. The twenty-two characters of this alphabet correspond exactly to the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew or Samaritan alphabet.

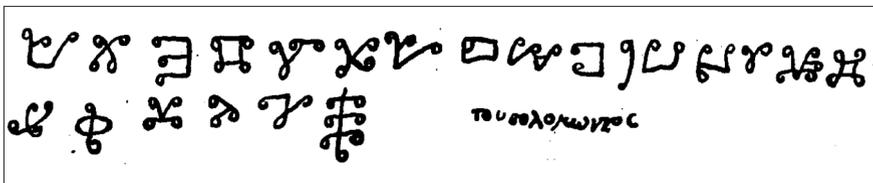


Figure 1

Examples of the same and similar alphabets can also be found in early-printed books on magic and esoteric subjects. Figure 2 shows what appears to be a variant form of this same alphabet, published by Henricus Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim in 1533; he calls it *Scriptura Malachim* (“the writing of the angels”), and says that it is used by Cabbalists [Agrippa 1533, 273–274 (book III, chapter 30)]⁴. In the same place Agrippa also publishes two other

³ Recent scholarly work on ring-letters includes such excellent studies as [Grévin, Véronèse 2004; Gordon 2011; Gordon 2013; Bohak 2011; Lang 2011; Dzwiza 2015]. Winkler [1930] is the classic pioneering work on which these scholars have relied. Before Winkler, the term was employed — and possibly introduced — by Schwab [1899, 293].

⁴ For these and other similar esoteric alphabets published by Western European scholars during the 16th century, see now [Campanini 2014].

Cabbalistic alphabets of ring-letters, which he calls *Scriptura Coelestis* (“the heavenly writing”) and *Scriptura Transitus Fluvii* (“the writing of the crossing of the river [sc. Jordan]”).

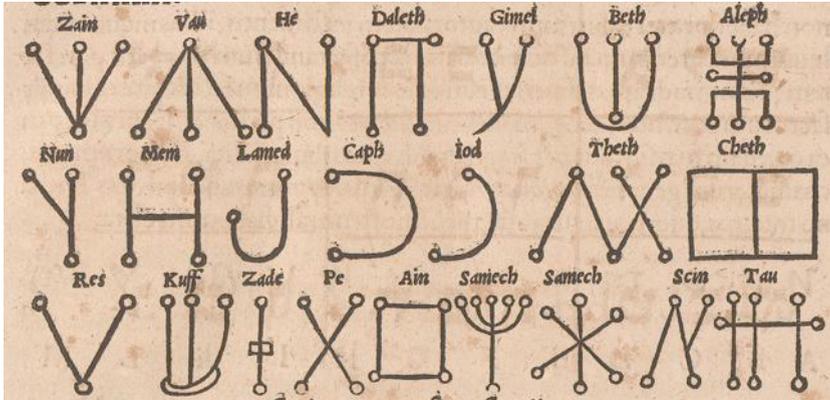


Figure 2

My second example is taken from a Christian magic spell, written on papyrus in the 5th century in Egypt in the Coptic language [Kropp 1930–1931, I, 47–49, 86; II, 57–60; III, plate I; Meyer, Smith 1994, 290–292; figure 3 is copied from Kropp 1930–31, III, plate I; the papyrus is Ms. Orientale 6796(4), held by the British Library]. (The Coptic alphabet is the same as the Greek alphabet, but supplemented with as many as seven additional letters derived from Egyptian demotic writing.)

The drawing reproduced in Figure 3 comes almost at the end of the spell. It shows Jesus Christ crucified between the two thieves. Above and around the drawing are inscribed several names of God and other words of magical power in Greek, followed by the names of seven mighty angels, also in their Greek form. These inscriptions are not written in the usual Greek letters of that time and place (which can be seen above and below the drawing in Figure 3), but in ring-letters (Figure 3).

Transcribed into ordinary Greek or Coptic letters, the ring-letter inscriptions read:

IC XC BHΘ BHΘA BHΘA IAΩ CABAΩΘ AΔONAI EΛΩEIV
 ΜΙΧΑΗΛ ΓΑΒΡΑΗΛ ΡΑΦΑΗΛ ΣΟΥΡΙΗΛ ΑΣΟΥΗΛ ΣΡΑΓΟΥΗΛ ΣΑΡΑΦΥΗΛ
 “IS ChS [*i.e.*, Jesus Christ, abbreviated], Bēth Bētha Bētha [magic words], IAΩ [= the common Greek rendering of the Hebrew Tetragrammaton, *i.e.* YHWH], Sabaoth, Adonai, Eloiy”.
 “Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Suriel, Asuel, Raguel, Saraphyel”.

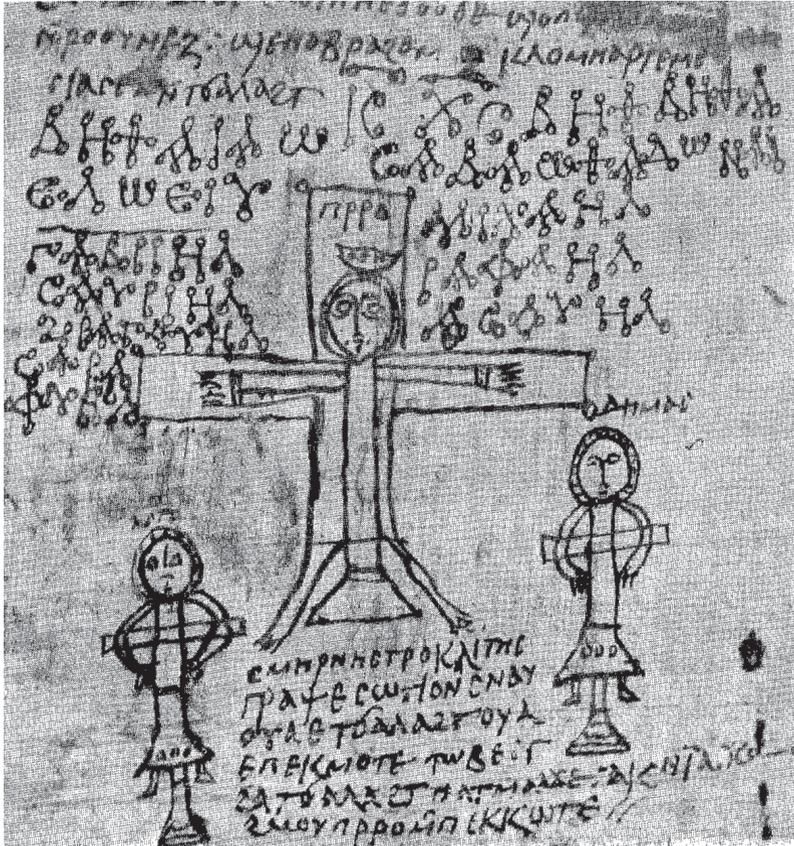


Figure 3

It was this illustration, reproduced online in a blog about Coptic magic in April 2019, that first called my attention to ring-letters and made me wonder whether Constantine might have been inspired by them as he created the characters of his Glagolitic alphabet [www.coptic-magic.phil.uni-wuerzburg.de/index.php/2019/04/26/jesus-and-the-unicorn-easter-and-the-harrowing-of-hell-in-coptic-magic/]

The similarity between ring-letters and the characters of the Glagolitic alphabet was first noted, so far as I know, by Sebastian Euringer, an Orientalist at the Philosophical-Theological College in Dillingen.

Professor Euringer had a side-interest in the tenth-century writer Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim, and so he went to the Bavarian State Library at Munich sometime in the later 1920s to have a look at the oldest and fullest extant manuscript of her works (Codex latinus Monacensis 14485). Euringer's

curiosity was piqued by a pair of strange alphabets that he unexpectedly found written on blank parchment at the end of the manuscript, and he suspected that at least one of them might be a Slavic alphabet. He shared his discovery with the eminent Slavist, N. S. Trubetzkoy, at the University of Vienna, who recognized the first alphabet as Cyrillic, the second as Glagolitic. Professor Trubetzkoy also understood the importance of Euringer's find, to which he immediately alerted his colleague N. N. Durnovo. The two Slavists published a pair of articles in 1930, together with a photograph of the folio on which the Slavic alphabets had been written [Trubetzkoy 1930; Durnovo 1930]. Slavists now know this pair of alphabets as the Munich Abecedaria; they are among the very earliest of all known complete Slavic abecedaria.

A few years later, in a footnote to an important article on a magical text from Ethiopia, Euringer himself asked whether there might be a connection between the characters of the Glagolitic alphabet and the *Brillenbuchstaben* that he often found in the magical and esoteric texts that he studied: "Ob das glagolitische Alphabet, das zahlreiche "*Brillenbuchstaben*" besitzt, damit etwas zu tun hat?" [Euringer 1937, 164]⁵.

No Slavist seems to have taken note of Euringer's footnote at the time of its publication, and it was almost two decades before another scholar independently posed much the same question. This was E. È. Granstrem, who noted some resemblance between individual Glagolitic letters and various special characters used in Greek astrological, alchemical and magical texts. Unfortunately, she did not take much into account — though she does mention their existence — the complete alphabets of ring-letters used here and there in Byzantine esoteric and magical contexts. To her credit, however, Granstrem did point to two passages in our best source for the life and works of Constantine (*Vita Constantini*, IV.1–2 and XIII.2–10) which suggest that Constantine might well have known about such alphabets and their use in esoteric contexts [Granstrem 1955, 304–305]. We shall return to these two passages below.

Quite recently another Slavist, Nicolina Trunte, briefly remarked on the same similarity between the characters of the Glagolitic alphabet and esoteric ring-letter alphabets: "Alle Versuche, die Glagolica insgesamt von einer anderen Schrift abzuleiten, sind aber gescheitert. Charakteristisch für die Glagolica ist hingegen eine fast durch-gehend zu beobachtende Stilisierung durch kleine Kringel an den Endpunkten der Buchstaben, die sich ganz ähnlich in den sogenannten Himmelschriften der Magier und Astrologen findet. Angesichts der Tatsache, dass Konstantin bei Leon dem Mathematiker, der zu seiner Zeit

⁵ Here he cites further examples of *Brillenbuchstaben* in Coptic, Arabic and Jewish magical texts, and references [Winkler 1930].

ein berühmter Astrologe war, studiert hat, scheint es durchaus vorstellbar, dass Konstantin sich davon hat beeinflussen lassen” [Trunte 2019/2020, 14; see now also Trunte (forthcoming), 24–27; Temčinas (forthcoming)].

* * *

Is it plausible to suppose that Constantine knew about these esoteric alphabets of ring-letters? More broadly put, is it likely that he was acquainted with such esoteric subjects as astrology, alchemy, and perhaps even magic?

To judge by our best early sources for his life and works, the answer must be unequivocal: Yes, it is entirely plausible. More likely than not, he knew about esoteric alphabets and their various uses.

According to all early sources, Constantine was one of the most learned Byzantines of the mid-9th century, and he was at the same time a mystic and philosopher of uncommon depth. Even as a boy he had impressed the adults who knew him by his passionate love of wisdom (σοφία), which he also had personified as Sophia, Divine Wisdom, and had once taken for his bride in a dream [*Vita Constantini*, III.1–3: Grivec, Tomšič 1960, 97, 171]. As a boy, too, he had been particularly moved by the writings of Gregory of Nazianzus, also known as Gregory the Theologian, which he took pains to learn by heart. On the wall of his room at home he had inscribed a short versified prayer of his own composition to that saint:

O Gregory, a human in body, in soul an angel!
Being a human in body, thou shewedst thyself to be an angel,
For thy mouth glorifies God as one of the Seraphim
And illuminates the Earth by instruction in the Right Faith.
Wherefore accept me, too, who fall before thee in love and faith,
And be my teacher and illuminator [*Vita Constantini*, III.18–20: Grivec, Tomšič 1960, 97, 172].

Because of his unusual intelligence and maturity, young Constantine was sent to Constantinople, where he was enrolled in the Imperial University in the palace at Magnaura. There he is said to have studied grammar, Homer, geometry, dialectic, all of philosophy, and the other “Hellenic” liberal arts, namely, rhetoric, arithmetic, astronomy and music [*Vita Constantini*, IV.1–4: Grivec, Tomšič 1960, 99, 173–174]. Despite the inclusion of dialectic in this list, the same source immediately remarks that Constantine shunned all disputation (a major academic activity in those days), “as if he would exchange earthly matters for heavenly ones, to fly out of this body and live with God” (*kako bi zemljnyjixъ nebesnaję přeměnilъ, izletěti is tělese sego i sъ Bogomъ žiti*) [*Vita Constantini*, IV.5: Grivec, Tomšič 1960, 99, 174].

With all this as general background, we turn to the four specific points in our argument.

* * *

First, as just noted, Constantine's university curriculum included "astronomy" (*astronomijě*). In his time, and for many centuries afterward, "astronomy" also included what we would now call "astrology": it is only in quite recent centuries that any sharp line has been drawn between these two. Indeed, one of Constantine's two named teachers at the university, Leo the Mathematician, was actively working to further the study and practice of astrology, and also the copying and preservation of earlier Greek works on that subject. It is in the surviving Byzantine manuscripts of astrology (so far as is known to scholarship) that most of the examples of ring-letter alphabets seem to have come down to us [CCAG 1898–1940, *passim*]. So it is more than likely that Constantine had encountered such esoteric alphabets in the course of his study of Byzantine astronomy/astrology.

* * *

Second, Constantine distinguished himself among the learned Byzantines of his age by the wide range of languages that he had learned. In his boyhood he had formally studied his native Greek, of course. As the son of an Imperial official, he would also have had to master Latin, which in his day was still one of the administrative languages of the entire Byzantine Empire, as well as the language of command within the Imperial army. Also, from the Slavs who cultivated the land around Thessalonica, who thronged its streets, and who worked as servants in its wealthy households, as a child Constantine would have learned some form of Slavic speech, as children will do. According to a good early source, the Emperor Michael III noted Constantine's fluency in Slavic, inasmuch as he was a native of Thessalonica, and "all Thessalonians speak pure Slavic fluently" (*Seluněne vsi čisto slověnskы besědujotъ*) [*Vita Methodii*, V.8: Grivec, Tomšič 1960, 155, 223].

As an adult, Constantine is said also to have mastered three Semitic languages, namely Hebrew, Samaritan and Syriac [*Vita Constantini*, VIII.10–14, VIII.15 (reading *surьskы* for *rusьskы*, as most scholars now do), and XIII.2–10: Grivec, Tomšič 1960, 109, 183–184; 128, 198–199; *Vita Constantini Brevis*, II: Teodorov-Balan, II, 34]. It is possible that he had studied Arabic as well, for in a disputation with Muslims he was able at one point to cite a passage from the Qur'an [*Vita Constantini*, VI.31: Grivec, Tomšič 1960, 104, 180–181]. In my earlier article, I also gave reason to think that he had at least a rudimentary acquaintance with Armenian [Mathiesen 2014, 209–211]⁶.

⁶ I regret that I had not been aware of Trunte [1997] as I was writing this article, for she had arrived at much the same conclusions as I, about two decades earlier.

During his short term of service as Patriarchal Librarian and Archivist (*vivliothikar̅* = βιβλιοθηκάριος) in the Great Church of St. Sophia, he would have had in his keeping many documents and books in all of these languages, and in many other languages as well [*Vita Constantini*, IV.15–17: Grivec, Tomšič 1960, 100, 176]. Like all well-educated Byzantines, of course, he would already have been generally aware that many other peoples had their own proper alphabets, which they used to write their own languages⁷. However, the list that he gives of such peoples, in the course of a disputation, is uncommonly long and specific: “Armenians, Persians, Abkhazes, Georgians, Sogdians, Goths, Avars, Turses[?], Chazars, Arabs, Egyptians, and many others” [*Vita Constantini*, XVI.8: Grivec, Tomšič 1960, 134, 205; some manuscripts add “Syrians” after “Egyptians” in this list]. To the best of my knowledge, no other Byzantine writer gives such a detailed list of peoples with their own alphabets.

It was Constantine’s knowledge of Semitic languages that let him to solve the mystery of an ancient chalice of precious stone, said to have been made by (or for) King Solomon, that was kept in the Great Church. It bore inscriptions in Hebrew and Samaritan characters, but no one had ever been able to read or interpret (*ni pročisti ni s̅kazati*) them. He, however, was able to both read and interpret them [*Vita Constantini*, XIII.3–10: Grivec, Tomšič 1960, 128, 199].

Now Byzantium, and especially its very cosmopolitan capital city, had never lacked people who could read Hebrew, whether written in the usual Hebrew alphabet used by Jews or in the older form of that same alphabet used by Samaritans. Constantine was far from being the only scholar in Constantinople with that ability. It would be quite surprising, therefore, that the inscriptions on the chalice had remained unread for so long — if, that is, the alphabets in which they had been written were the ordinary Hebrew or Samaritan alphabets. If, however, the verses had been inscribed on the chalice in one or another of the esoteric versions of the Hebrew or Samaritan alphabet, perhaps an alphabet of ring-letters, then it would be less surprising that they had remained unread for so many centuries. Under this hypothesis, Constantine’s ability to read the mysterious inscriptions on Solomon’s chalice may serve as further evidence that he was familiar with various esoteric alphabets like the one illustrated in Figure 1 above — which, in that illustration, was labeled “Solomon’s [alphabet]” by the scribe who copied it⁸.

⁷ Cf. a Byzantine scholiast edited by Hilgard [1901, 31]: “Persians use other characters for the letters of their alphabet [than those that we Greeks use]; the Syrians use yet other [characters], and other peoples yet others”.

⁸ However, Ševčenko [1967] found and published a Greek text parallel to part of this account of the verses on Solomon’s chalice, from a manuscript of the 11th century, and he raised the question whether this section in the *Vita Constantini* might be purely fictional.

* * *

Third, for a number of years, between various diplomatic missions for the Emperor, Constantine served as a professor at the Imperial University, where he taught philosophy. Our surviving sources say relatively little about this part of his life, but one mentions that he studied philosophy in four languages, namely, Greek, Latin, Syriac and Hebrew [*Vita Constantini Brevis*, II: Teodorov-Balan, II, 34: Constantine had studied philosophy in four languages, namely, Greek, Latin, Syriac and Hebrew (*i čtyrými jazyky filosofiji naučivъ se: i elinъsky i rimъsky, sŭrŭbъsky, židovъsky*)]. Another says that his academic duties included “teaching both native and foreign philosophies” (*učiti filosofiję tuzemnyję i stranъnyję*) [*Vita Constantini*, IV.19: Grivec, Tomšič 1960, 100, 176; a variant reading of the latter passage is *učiti filosofiji tuzemnyję i stranъnyję*, “to teach philosophy to both natives and foreigners”].

More significant to our inquiry is the statement made by a Greek bishop of Ohrid, Theophylact, in the second half of the 11th century, that Constantine was “great in the outer philosophy (ἡ ἔξω φιλοσοφία), greater still in the inner (ἡ ἔσω), a person who understood the nature of things that truly exist (τῶν ὄντων ὄντως), but better yet (μᾶλλον) [the nature] of the One That Exists (τοῦ Ἐνός ὄντος), by whom all things (τὰ πάντα) came to exist (εἶναι ἔλαβον) from what is not manifest (ἐκ μὴ φαινομένων)” [*Vita Clementis*, II, §4: Tunickij 1918, 68–69; Milev 1966, 78–79, 149]⁹.

Some scholars have interpreted this passage as merely contrasting Constantine’s profound knowledge of pagan Hellenic philosophy with his even more profound knowledge of Christian theology, relying on St. Paul’s use of the contrast between “those without” (οἱ ἔξω) the Christian Church and “those within” (οἱ ἔσω) it [cf. Grivec 1960, 35–36; Milev 1966, loc. cit.]. Yet St. Paul applies that contrast to people only, not to philosophies. Applied to philosophies, as it is here, the contrast in Greek between “outer” (ἔξω) or “exoteric” (ἐξωτερικός) and “inner” (ἔσω) or “esoteric” (ἐσωτερικός) is much older than St. Paul, and distinguishes between the two kinds of philosophy in a somewhat different manner. Exoteric doctrines were those that could be freely disseminated, whereas esoteric doctrines were reserved for a teacher’s inner circle of qualified and prepared students alone [Mathiesen 2005, 220–221]. Certainly the contrast between the two sorts of philosophy is expressed by Theophylact not in simple Biblical or Christian doctrinal terms, but in quite an abstract way that derives from Greek (Orthodox Christian) mystical or esoteric philosophy [Mathiesen 2005, 222–224].

⁹ Although this source is relatively late and in Greek, scholars have argued — successfully, in my view — that it draws on much earlier reliable Slavic and Greek sources that have not come down to us [cf. Grivec, Tomšič 1960, 40; Grivec 1960, 253–254].

If this is the correct interpretation of Theophylact’s statement, then it is one further piece of evidence in support of Constantine’s familiarity with esoteric doctrines in general, and thus perhaps also with esoteric alphabets.

And fourth, Constantine was a lifelong mystic. Even in his boyhood, as noted above, he had yearned to live a life like that of his favorite author, Gregory of Nazianzus, as “a human in body, in soul an angel”.

As he matured, Constantine came more and more to scorn all worldly power and possessions, preferring instead a solitary life of contemplation and study apart from the world. On one occasion, when offered wealth and honors as an inducement to enter Imperial service, he replied that he wanted no such things; he only desired to recover “the honors and riches of [his] forebears” (*praděbnyjč čьsti i bogatьstva*) [*Vita Constantini*, IV.14: Grivec, Tomšič 1960, 100, 175–176]. Scholars now generally agree that the forebears whom Constantine had in mind when he said this were not any of his own recent ancestors, but the first parents of the human race, Adam and Eve, before their Fall [Grivec 1960, 30–32].

This mystic flight from all terrestrial concerns toward the heavenly life of the angels, like unto the life of Adam and Eve before their Fall, was to be a recurring theme throughout Constantine’s entire life. Several times during his career in Constantinople, he fled the demands of Imperial service and secluded himself in a monastery for a while. Finally, toward the end of his life, he was able to live an angelic life for a number of days while still in his own mortal flesh: fifty days before his death he was consecrated into the greater, or angelic, monastic habit (τὸ μέγα καὶ ἀγγελικὸν σχῆμα), which he continued to wear unto the end of his life [*Vita Constantini*, XVIII.1–13: Grivec, Tomšič 1960, 140–141, 210–212]¹⁰.

Is it not likely that such a mystic, so focused on the angelic life in preference to life in the body, would have paid particular attention to esoteric ring-letter alphabets that bore such names as the “writing of the angels” and the “celestial writing”, if he had encountered them — as is quite likely he did — during the course of his studies?¹¹

¹⁰ This passage speaks of two separate consecrations into the monastic habit on two successive days, first into the lesser habit (XVIII.3) and then into the greater (XVIII.5).

¹¹ The sources that we cited above for names of these alphabets such as “writing of the angels” (*Scriptura Malachim*) and “celestial writing” (*Scriptura Coelestis*) come from the 15th and 16th centuries, but the idea behind such names for ring-letter alphabets — like the ring-letter alphabets themselves — is very much older, going back as far as Constantine’s time and even earlier. This is the idea that the small circles in ring-characters represent stars, and the lines that join these circles trace out letters and words that can be read in the starry sky, inscribing — for those with eyes to see — a Wisdom that is beyond any purely human language, and Names of far more power than any human

This evidence convinces me that Constantine the Philosopher was quite well acquainted with Byzantine esoteric philosophy, and thus would have known about esoteric alphabets of ring-letters.

* * *

In conclusion, we claim **only** that Constantine plausibly took the “look and feel,” the general style of the *characters* of his Glagolitic alphabet from Byzantine esoteric ring-letter alphabets — **nothing more than that**.

Constantine’s original Glagolitic alphabet itself — the inventory and order of its letters, the characters and phonetic values and names of its individual letters, and their numerical values — was a complex and somewhat impractical creation, as I showed in my earlier article. He had, of course, other sources of inspiration in addition to ring-letter alphabets, among which were the Greek, Hebrew, Samaritan and Armenian alphabets; moreover, he created the Glagolitic alphabet with other concerns (some practical, some much less so) in mind as well [Mathiesen 2014]¹².

Here we have argued **only** (1) that, more likely than not, Constantine had met with such esoteric alphabets of ring-letters in the course of his studies, and (2) that his mystical inclinations and the wide scope of his philosophical interests would led him to pay particular attention to esoteric alphabets wherever he happened to find them.

None of this is absolute proof that Constantine knew about esoteric ring-letter alphabets, but it does, I think, make it highly likely that he did. And if he did, then it is quite likely that such alphabets inspired the general “look and feel” of the ring-characters that he devised for almost all of the letters of his original Glagolitic alphabet.

* * *

I expect that this will be my last contribution to Church Slavonic philology and to Slavic Studies in general. In that field my first mentor and teacher was Francis J. Whitfield. It was he who first introduced me to Church Slavonic philology, to the problems of the glagolitic alphabet and to the works of N. S. Trubetzkoy and N. N. Durnovo in the academic year 1963/4, and who

names. Winkler [1930, 163–167] sketches some of the history of this idea, also citing references to it in the Arabic comprehensive work of magic titled *Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm* (“The Goal of the Wise”, otherwise known in a Latin version as the *Picatrix*), which was compiled in the 10th century on the basis of a great number of earlier sources (*Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm*, bk. II, ch. 5, 9; bk. IV, ch. 2, as translated into German [Ritter, Plessner 1962, 83–86, 110–113, 319–322]).

¹² Some of these other concerns, I want to emphasize, may also have been esoteric or mystical. See Uspenskij [2005; 2013], building on earlier work by Georg Tschernochvostoff (not published during the latter’s lifetime, but summarized by Kiparsky [1964] and elsewhere).

provided me with an inspiring example of rigorous, unsparing scholarship¹³. Whatever I may have accomplished as a scholar myself owes as much and more to him as to any other academic. I have long regretted that I had not found an opportunity to record my deepest respect and gratitude to him in any enduring form. Let the present article serve as that record.

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¹³ See Hughes, Nichols, Timberlake [1996] for a fine appreciation of him as an exemplary scholar, teacher and person.

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