

Extract from **Amelie Lanier** at **Context XXI**

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The Cyrillic script and the Old Church Slavonic language

■ AMELIE LANIER

The roots of the Russian orthodoxy lie outside Russia, in the Balkans. The Cyrillic Script wasn't created by Cyril, and Cyril's original name was Konstantin.

The "Apostles of the Slavs", the brothers Cyril and Method (Michael) came from Thessalonica, a town then on the borderline between Slavs and Greeks. They knew both languages: the language of the Macedonian Slavs, and Greek. They were invited to the Great Moravian Empire in 863 or 864 to help to spread Christianity among the subjects of this empire. The duke of Great Moravia, Rastislav, with their help wanted to diminish the influence of the Bavarian missionaries who had been promoting Christianity up to this moment in his lands. The Bavarian rulers had in this way tried to gain influence in the Great Moravian Empire, and Rastislav tried to counter their activities.

The Great Moravian Empire's whereabouts and boundaries are not clearly defined. It is generally assumed that its centre – unknown till today – was in nowadays Moravia. Cyril and Method followed his call and founded a school for Slav-Christian religion – the Slavonian Academy – that may have been where the castle of Devin is, in nowadays Slovakia. The parishes they were given had their centres in the towns of Nitra (nowadays Slovakia) and Syrmium (nowadays Sremska Mitrovica in Serbia). Some historians believe that the centre of the Great Moravian em-

pire might have been in nowadays Croatia. The sources to determine these assumptions are scarce and unclear, the national political ambitions both fuelling and impeding research are strong.



Devin castle above the Danube, near the mouth of the Morava

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Cyril and Method therefore set out for a mission that was not only religious, but very political. Their emperor, Michael III. of Constantinople, this way also wanted to gain influence among the Slavs. He supported them with all means within his possibilities.

In the course of this mission Cyril created a script, the *Glagolica*. The sources of the *Glagolica* are disputed.

The dispute around the origin of this script is connected to the question whether the Slavs had a script at all or were completely illiterate until the appearance of the apostles. The most widely accepted theory is that they had no script and Cyril created this script out of a Greek script, as at this stage there were different Greek scripts. It almost in no letter resembles nowadays Greek or Slav Script. Therefore the assumption that there was a Slav script

cannot be completely dismissed.



Entrance into the castle of Nitra

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Cyril translated the Bible into a Slav language that was based on the Macedonian dialect, with many words from the Slavs of the Great Moravian Empire. In this way he did not only create a script for the Slavs, but also a language that became the liturgical language of the whole Eastern church, the *Old Church Slavonic*. With modifications – approaching the national languages – it continues to be the language of the orthodox Slav churches. In medieval Russia or the Balkans it was the language of the scholars, as Latin in the Western church. For a very short time (868-886) it was acknowledged by Rome as a liturgical language.

The only country that uses and hails the *Glagolica* nowadays – as a symbol of national identity – is *Croatia*, a country that doesn't adhere to any Eastern/orthodox church, but considers itself a stronghold of the Roman church. The *Glagolica* is even printed on the 100 Kuna-bill.

angular Glagolica	round	modern Cyrillic	latin
Ɱ	Ɑ	Aa	a
Ɱ	Ɑ	Бб	b
Ɱ	Ɑ	Вв	v
Ɱ	Ɑ	Гг	g

The *Cyrillic script* that is used today by Serbia, Bulgaria, Makedonia, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and several Middle Asian countries was created by a disciple of Method, *Kliment*, who together with the other adherents of Cyril and Method had been expelled from Great Moravia by a Svbian envoy of the pope after Method's death. The Slavonic Academy had been closed. This expulsion of the Slavic monks from Central Europe and the prohibition of the *Old Church Slavonic* language in liturgy in 886 by the pope are considered important steps towards the Great Schism between Eastern and Western church, be-

tween Byzantium and Rome.

Kliment was ordered to create or new, more simple script for the Slavs by the Bulgarian tsar *Simeon I.* (ruled 893-927). Simeon in 918 had founded an own national church, the Bulgarian Patriarchate, and wanted to challenge the leading role of Constantinople by becoming the head of Slavonic orthodoxy. For translations of the Bible and correspondence in church affairs he wanted a script with more simple and straight letters than the Glagolica. This new script was certainly based on the Greek, Kliment only used some letters of the Glagolica for sounds that did not exist in Greek.

In Russia the Cyrillic script was reformed in the time of Peter the Great. In these reform movement again the script should be simplified and made more easily read- and writeable. This time the ruler had even more worldly affairs in mind, and foreigners used to Latin script: With the new script, also called "civilian" , Peter wanted to foment Russia's approach to Europe. These changes were partially followed by other countries which also use the Cyrillic script.

The last substantial changes were made after the Great October Revolution. Since 1918 the Russian Cyrillic script has remained the same.

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