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A NOTE ON  
О ПИСМЕНЕХЪ ЧЕРНОРИЗЬСА ХРАБРА



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A NOTE ON  
O PISMENEXŤ ČRĚNORIZŤCA XRABRA

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Which Church Slavonic alphabet, the glagolitic or the cyrillic, did Cyril invent? Many nineteenth-century slavists turned to the text *O pismenexŤ črěnORIZŤca xrabra* for an answer to this question, and each, as a rule, found support in it for whichever answer he thought best. Finally, in 1895, Vatroslav Jagić pointed out that the passages cited in proof of each opinion were in fact either ambiguous or—in all probability—later interpolations in the text. And this is quite correct: a number of passages fit the glagolitic alphabet more closely than the cyrillic, and one passage, possibly an interpolation, fits the cyrillic alphabet more closely than the glagolitic, but no passage refers to the one or the other alphabet without any ambiguity whatsoever.<sup>1</sup>

Curiously enough, one passage of the text which might have been cited in favor of the glagolitic alphabet seems never to have received a satisfactory exegesis in the literature of the question.<sup>2</sup> This is all the more curious because it is, in my opinion, the least ambiguous of all the passages which might be cited in favor of either alphabet. It is this passage which is the subject of the present note.

The passage in question is the following:

drudzii že g[lagol]jětŤ. počto estŤ 38. pismenŤ stvorilŤ, a moŤetŤ se  
i men'šimŤ togo pisati, jakoŤe i grěci, 24. pišatŤ. i ne vědětŤ koli-

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<sup>1</sup> I. V. Jagić, *RazsuŤdenija juŤnoslavjanskoj i russkoj stariny o cerkovno-slavjanskom jazykě*, Imp. Akademija nauk, Otdělenie russkago jazyka i slovesnosti, Izslědovanija po russkomu jazyku, I (1885—1895), 287—1023, esp. 315—317. This view was reaffirmed in V. Jagić, *Entstehungsgeschichte der kirchenslavischen Sprache*, 2nd ed. (Berlin, 1913), p. 129. See also P. A. Lavrov's review of the first edition of the *Entstehungsgeschichte* in *Izvēstija Otdělenija russkago jazyka i slovesnosti Imp. Akademii nauk*, VI (1901): 1, 242—324, esp. 288—289, and Valerij Pogorělov's reaction to Lavrov's comments, *Zamětka po povodu skazanija Xrabra o pi'smenax*, *ibidem*, VI (1901): 4, 340—345.

<sup>2</sup> This passage is mentioned in passing in Pogorělov's *Zamětka* cited above, p. 344, and unsatisfactorily interpreted in R. Abicht, *Das Alphabet Chrabrs*, *Archiv für slavische Philologie*, XXXI (1910), 210—217, esp. 215—216.

цѣмъ рѣшѣтъ грѣси. естъ бо ubo, 24. pismenъ, nq ne napлѣнѣѣтъ се  
 тѣми knigy. nq priložili sqтъ dvoгласныхъ, 11. i въ čismenex že,  
 3: 6-e. i 9 desetnoe. i 9 сътноје. i съbiraqt се ихъ, 38. тѣмъ же po tomu  
 pod[o]bno i въ тѣжде образъ створи s[вѣ]tyi Kirilъ, 38. pismenъ.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, it was said that Cyril did not need to create 38 letters, since one can write with fewer, as do the Greeks with 24. The author of *O pismenexъ* refutes this by observing that Cyril did not depart from the Greek model in creating 38 letters, but rather followed it (*po tomu pod[o]bno i въ тѣжде образъ створи s[вѣ]tyi Kirilъ, 38. pismenъ.*), for the Greeks too write with 38 letters: 24 letters proper, 11 diphthongs and 3 numerical signs (*staû* for 6, *kóppa* for 90 and *sampî* for 900).<sup>4</sup>

This refutation is convincing only if the number of all proper letters, diphthongs and numerical signs in the alphabet created by Cyril also totals 38.<sup>5</sup> If this were not the case, then the opponents of Cyril's alphabet could turn the argument in *O pismenexъ* upon the head of its author

<sup>3</sup> Ten independent manuscripts of what is assumed to be the oldest version of *O pismenexъ črнnorizъca xrabra* are known; they are all listed (with bibliography) in Kujo Kuev, *Dva novi prepisa na Xrabrovoto sačinenie*, *Bolgarska akademija na naukite, Otdelenie za istoričeski i pedagogičeski nauki, Izvestija na Institut za istorija, X* (1962), 225—244. The oldest of these manuscripts is dated 1348; the passage given is transliterated from this text (as published in Jagić's *Razsuždenija* already cited, p. 298) with omission of accents, breathings and *titra* over numerals, and with expansion of abbreviated words. Seven of the remaining nine witnesses were available to me in good editions (the works by Kuev and by Jagić just mentioned, O. M. Bodjanski, *O drevnějšem svidečelstvě, čto cerkovno-knižnyj jazyk est slavjano-bulgarskij, Žurnal Ministerstva narodnago prosvěščenia, čast XXXVIII* (1843), pp. 130—168, and Jordan Ivanov, *Bolgarski starini iz Makedonija*, 1st ed. (Sofia, 1908), pp. 75—81, and 2nd ed. (Sofia, 1931), pp. 440—446; the two other witnesses were available to me only in the variant readings given to the texts in Kuev's article. None of these witnesses, nor any of the later redactions published in Jagić's *Razsuždenija*, give any variant readings which need to be considered here, except perhaps that one witness has *pismenexъ* for the form *čismenexъ* of the manuscript of 1348 (Kuev, p. 234, variant no. 67).

<sup>4</sup> Compare the account given farther on in *O pismenexъ* of the creation of the Greek alphabet in seven stages: 16 letters, 3 letters, 2 letters, 3 letters, 5 diphthongs, 6 diphthongs, and 3 numerical signs; in all, 24 letters, 11 diphthongs and 3 numerical signs. Note, incidentally, that the "11 diphthongs" of the text, presumably Greek *ai, au, ei, eu, oi, ou, ēu, ui, āi, ēi* and *ōi*, were at that time diphthongs only in spelling, not in pronunciation (/e, av, i, ev, ū, u, iv, ü, a, i and o/), and all but three of them might be more accurately called *digraphs*.

<sup>5</sup> Nikolaj Durnovo, *Mysli i predpoloženija o proisxoždenii staroslavjanskogo jazyka i slavjanskix alfavitov*, *Byzantinoslavica, I* (1929), 48—85, esp. 70, points out that the 38 Church Slavonic letters of *O pismenexъ* ought to be taken as including both letters proper and diphthongs, since the 38 Greek letters include diphthongs. Since he has the glagolitic alphabet in view, he does not consider the possibility that the 38 Church Slavonic letters ought to be taken as including special Church Slavonic numerical signs as well. Likewise Rajko Nahtigal, *Doneski k uprašanju o postanku glagolice*, *Znanstveno društvo za humanistične vede v Ljubljani, Razprave, I* (1923), 135—178, esp. 148—149.

and invalidate his claim that Cyril followed the Greek model in creating his alphabet. For example, if Cyril's alphabet had a total of 38 proper letters and diphthongs, and also 3 numerical signs, then its opponents could say: even as the author of *O pismenexъ* added all three types of Greek graphs to get a total of 38, so must he add all three types of Church Slavonic graphs—and then this total will be 41, which proves rather that Cyril did not follow the Greek model, and leaves the charge against him unanswered. Consequently, if this argument was made with as much skill as the other arguments in *O pismenexъ* (and the fact that the argument attacks the statement that the Greeks use 24 letters, which, though technically true, can easily be controverted, rather than the statement that one can write Church Slavonic with fewer than 38 letters, which is more troublesome to controvert, may be taken as evidence of this skill here), then the total number of all proper letters, diphthongs and numerical signs in the alphabet attributed to Cyril was in fact 38.

If this is so, then the alphabet attributed in *O pismenexъ* to Cyril could not have been the cyrillic alphabet, for that contains *at least 2 (and probably 3) numerical signs*, 1 diphthong (*u*) and 24 proper letters, all borrowed from the Greek alphabet (and all 24 Greek proper letters must be included, either as Church Slavonic proper letters or as Church Slavonic numerical signs), and at least 13 proper letters and diphthongs created for specifically Church Slavonic sounds (*b, ž, c, č, š, v, y, v, ě, ju, q, e, ja*—and perhaps also *dz* and *št*); a total of at least 40, probably 41, and perhaps as many as 43 proper letters, diphthongs and numerical signs.<sup>6</sup>

The alphabet described in *O pismenexъ* could have been the glagolitic alphabet; there are a number of plausible reconstructions of an original glagolitic alphabet containing a total of 38 proper letters and diphthongs (and, of course, no special numerical signs).<sup>7</sup>

Consequently, one can assert either that the alphabet attributed in *O pismenexъ* to Cyril was the glagolitic alphabet or that, contrary to his practice in the rest of the text, the author of *O pismenexъ* presented a clumsy and unsuccessful refutation of the charge brought against Cyril's

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<sup>6</sup> In the earliest cyrillic the numerical signs for 6 and 90 were distinct from the letters *dz* and *č*; it is not clear whether or not the earliest cyrillic numerical sign for 900 was distinct from the letter *q* (the use of *c* as the sign for 900 seems to be later). See A. X. Vostokov, *Grammatika cerkovno-slovenskago jazyka izložennaja po drevnejšim onago pis'mennym pamjatnikam*, Učenyja zapiski Vtorogo otdělenija Imp. Akademii nauk, VII (1863): 2, pp. 8—9, or Paul Diehs, *Altkirchenslavische Grammatik*, 2nd ed. (Heidelberg, 1963), pp. 22—23, 25, and 49: Anm. 48 (bibliography).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, the reconstruction (of 36 letters and 2 diphthongs (digraphs) not included in the alphabet proper) given in Nikolaus S. Trubetzkoy, *Altkirchenslavische Grammatik: Schrift-, Laut- und Formensystem*, ed. Rudolf Jagoditsch, Sitzungsberichte der philosophisch-historischen Klasse der österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaft, Vol. 228 (1954): 4, pp. 15—37.

alphabet in this passage. We can not be absolutely certain that the second alternative is not the case, and so the judgement of V. Jagić still remains correct. It seems to me, however, that the second alternative is not at all probable, and therefore that the passage under discussion is a relatively unambiguous piece of evidence that Cyril invented the glagolitic alphabet.

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