

Mirela Ivanova: *Inventing Slavonic. Cultures of Writing between Rome and Constantinople*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press 2024 (Oxford Studies in Byzantium). XIX, 274 p., 6 ill., 1 map. £ 95.00/\$ 120.00. ISBN: 978-0-19-889150-5.

This book is important, intellectually sweeping, and strikingly original. At the most elemental level, Mirela Ivanova provides an alternative narrative of the invention of the alphabets (Glagolitic and Cyrillic) that were used to write the language known as (Old Church) Slavonic in the late ninth and early tenth centuries. But the boldest and most innovative feature of the text is its strong argument about the goals and audiences of *Vita Constantini* (which Ivanova calls “Life of Cyril”) and *Vita Methodii* (“Life of Methodios”), the earliest texts written in that language, which have long been the main sources for historical reconstruction. The author also offers an equally innovative interpretation of *On Letters*, a work attributed to a monk named Khra(bā)r, which has long, but wrongly, been viewed by many (including this reviewer) as a defense of one alphabet (Glagolitic) against the other (Cyrillic).

In her thoughtful, well-researched book, Ivanova traces the ways in which the ‘myth of Cyril and Methodios’ was established and she persuasively documents the implications of an attentive reading of the two hagiographic sources as literary creations, with specific emphasis on rhetorical effects, Biblical citations, and cultural milieu. In doing so, she successfully fuses literary analysis with intellectual history, analyzing the changes in relations between Rome and Constantinople over seven decades between ca. 860 and ca. 930.

The invention of the ‘Slavonic’ alphabet was less about the inventor, as the author argues, and more about identity debates surrounding the transformations brought about by the introduction of writing and literacy. Ivanova’s thought-provoking book addresses fundamental questions concerning the history of the Byzantine church in the decades following the restoration of icons in 843 (particularly the so-called Photian schism), the relations between Rome and Constantinople, missionary work from (or simply sponsored by) both centers, the complicated political developments in Moravia, the translation program in early tenth-century Bulgaria, and the multilingual environment in and around the political center of that country, Preslav. Following a chronological order, Ivanova divides these questions into three parts dedi-

cated to the invention (“Inventing Slavonic”, pp. 35–101), institutionalization (“Institutionalising Slavonic”, pp. 105–175), and defense of Slavonic (“Defending Slavonic”, pp. 179–235), respectively.

The introduction (pp. 1–31) sets the stage by means of a few incursions into the cultural politics of the East Central, Southeastern, and Eastern Europe in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The coherent picture of Constantine (who took the name Cyril upon his deathbed) and his brother Methodius, as well of the invention of the “Slavonic” alphabet is “in fact a Frankenstein’s monster, bolted together from texts which originally attributed quite different, often conflicting meanings to the elements which make up this supposedly unified narrative” (p. 4). Ivanova uses “Slavonic” to refer both to the language (“Old Church Slavonic”) and to the alphabet (either Glagolitic or Cyrillic) employed for writing that language. The introduction also tackles the historiographic problems involved in the study of Moravia and Bulgaria. Particularly interesting, especially in the light of book’s conclusion, are Ivanova’s comments on claims to indigeneity. That the two brothers Constantine and Methodius were turned into Bulgarians in the late Middle Ages and the early modern period is just one aspect of that story. Nonetheless, it is unclear why the author chose the pop star Dua Lipa and her notion of Greater Albania to illustrate claims to indigeneity. The topic has been dealt much more adroitly (and in reference to historiographic matters, not to pop culture) by Speros Vryonis, more than three decades ago, and more recently by Dimitrios Stamatopoulos in an excellent study that is curiously absent from the bibliography (pp. 243–272) of the book under review.¹

Part 1 (chapter 1: “Constantine-Cyril Today: A Critical Assessment”, pp. 35–41; chapter 2: “The *Life of Constantine-Cyril*: A New Reading”, pp. 42–80; chapter 3: “Learned Saints between Rome and Constantinople: The *VC* in Context”, pp. 81–101) chooses *Vita Constantini* for an in-depth investigation of the historical and rhetorical contexts that surround the invention of the ‘Slavonic’ alphabet. By analyzing structural parallels and thematic content

1 S. Vryonis: Some Ethnogenetic Theories of Greeks, Roumanians, Bulgarians, and Turks in 19th–20th Centuries. In: Septième Congrès international d’études du sud-est-européen (Thessalonique, 29 août–4 septembre 1994). Athens 1994, pp. 765–791; D. Stamatopoulos: Byzantium after the Nation. The Problem of Continuity in Balkan Historiographies. Budapest/Vienna/New York 2022, pp. 125–188 (for the Bulgarian case).

and style in the text, Ivanova traces how Constantine-Cyril was created as a “‘third-way’ candidate” (p. 100), that is a figure transcending the mid- to late-ninth-century debates in Byzantium concerning the utility of an “outside education” (p. 97) for consolidating the orthodox faith. She advances several bold ideas, some of which are likely to cause controversy, even though they are supported by solid arguments rooted in a careful reading of the text. Building upon observations made by other scholars, Ivanova claims that *Vita Constantini* “was written in Greek” (p. 47), the text that we now have being a translation into Slavonic made a few decades later, but before *Vita Methodii* was written (p. 50). Although citing (and agreeing with) Sergei Ivanov, who denied the existence of a missionary ideology in Byzantium, Ivanova rightly links the significance of languages, especially of learning languages, and long-distance travel, two key themes of *Vita Constantini*, to a “manifesto for missionary activity” (p. 77).² In other words, Ivanova sees mission in *Vita Constantini*, whereas most other scholars before her preferred to see Constantine-Cyril as a teacher, not a missionary. This is particularly important, given that along with Hebrew and Samaritan, ‘ros’sky’ (an adjective that has caused much discussion) is a language that Constantine acquires in preparation for his mission to the Khazars. Ivanova ignores Predrag Komatina’s book on the church policy of Byzantium between 843 and 886.³ This is regrettable, given that she could have found much support for her ideas in Komatina’s book, particularly his suggestion that the Gospel and Psalter written in the ‘ros’sky’ letters, which are mentioned in *Vita Constantini* as found by Constantine in Cherson in the winter of 860–861 are a “valuable testimony to the first steps of the Byzantine state and church in the process of Christianizing”⁴ the Rus’ (i. e., the ‘Vikings in the East’). On the other hand, many will find acceptable the idea that the *Vita Constantini* is a combination of two hagiographical motifs – that of a traveling ascetic and that of

2 For Ivanov’s thesis, see his S. A. Ivanov: “Pearls Before Swine.” *Missionary Work in Byzantium*. Paris 2015 (Centre de recherche d’histoire et civilisation de Byzance. Monographies 47).

3 P. Komatina: *Crkvena politika Vizantije od kraja ikonoborstva do smrti cara Vasilija I*. Belgrade 2014 (Vizantološki Institut Srpske Akademije Nauka i Umetnosti. Posebna izdanja 43).

4 P. Komatina: *Church Policy of Byzantium after the Triumph of Orthodoxy (843–886)*. Cham, Switzerland 2025 (New Approaches to Byzantine History and Culture), p. 164. The original quote in Serbian is in Komatina: *Crkvena politika*(n. 3), p. 154.

the educated rhetor – both meant to enhance the missionary attributes of the hero.⁵

The problems of the church in Moravia are in the focus of Part 2 (chapters 4–6). In chapter 4 (“The Myth of Cyril and Methodios Revisited”, pp. 105–113), by tracing the historiographic portrait of Methodius, Ivanova argues that the conflation of the narratives in *Vita Constantini* and *Vita Methodii* into one story has obscured fundamental differences between the two texts. She rightfully notes that it seems “as though scholars stopped closely reading the texts a long time ago” (p. 108). In chapter 5 (“Cyril, Slavonic, and the Pope in the *Life of Methodios*”, pp. 114–138), Ivanova offers a close textual reading of *Vita Methodii* and its relation to *Vita Constantini*. Again, some of her conclusions may raise a few eyebrows, but she is right, in my opinion, on all accounts. The source of legitimacy in *Vita Methodii* is first with the pope, and then with the emperor. The author of *Vita Methodii* manipulated the story in *Vita Constantini* to insert the figure of Methodius and to forge a brotherly bond, which is otherwise not present in *Vita Constantini*. Perhaps even more importantly, Ivanova argues that in *Vita Methodii*, Methodius is presented as previously involved with a ‘Slovenic lordship’ (*kniazshenie [...] Slovēnsko*) because later in the text he is sent by the pope not to one secular ruler or another, “but to the Slavs as an ethnic group and all lands they occupy” (p. 136). Ivanova interprets *Vita Methodii* as a declaration (in the sense of John Searle) that the Moravian mission was aligned with the papal policies and practices and that, despite Frankish claims to the contrary, Methodius was a legitimate archbishop (chapter 6: “Popes, Bishops, and Emperors between Rome and Constantinople”, pp. 139–175). Elevating “the ethnic qualities of the mission to Moravia” (p. 175) was one way to make that declaration. In other words, the Slavs as a community were invented to accommodate the invention of the “Slavonic alphabet” (*ibid.*) to a political context.

In Part 3 (chapter 7: “Where Not to Start: Slavonic in Balkan History”, pp. 179–187; chapter 8: “A Case for Slavonic: The Earliest Defence of the Alphabet”, pp. 188–215; chapter 9: “Slavonic and Greek Bookmen in the Tenth-Century Balkans”, pp. 216–235) the emphasis shifts from Moravia to Bulgaria. Judging by the number of surviving manuscript copies, *On Letters*

5 As a matter of fact, this has been put forward independently and almost concomitantly by L. Simeonova: Zhanrovi osobenosti na Prostrannoto zhitie na sv. Kiril – khibrid mezhdu agiografskiiia literaturnen kanon i kāsnoantichnata filosofska biografiiia. In: Kirilo-metodievski studii 35, 2025, pp. 49–68.

enjoyed great popularity in the Middle Ages. Ivanova places the text within the genre of grammarian works, along with Dionysios Thrax's *Art of Grammar* and the Scholia Marciana. She rightly points out the distinct parallel between “scratching and scraping” (*grammais kai zosmais*) in the *Art of Grammar* and the “lines and scratches” (p. 196) (*chrātami i rēzan'mi*) in *On Letters*. Instead of runes used by Slavs, this parallel shows that to Khrabār, the Slavs, being pagan, could not possibly “write Slavic speech” (ibid.).⁶ Ivanova highlights both the peculiar rendition of the ‘Cyrillo-Methodian tradition’ in *On Letters* and the tensions in that text. Khrabār's Constantine created the letters and translated the books, a linkage which serves a specific purpose: God sends Constantine to the Slavic people; he is not a missionary anymore, but a providential figure in the universal history of the Slavs (pp. 214–215). This, according to Ivanova, is an argument made to draw a battle line between bilingual bookmen in tenth-century Bulgaria who favored Greek and those who used primarily, if not only, Slavonic. The author lists the original compositions in Slavonic that were produced in Preslav but neglects the outstanding production of the ‘scholarly outlier,’ Clement of Ohrid (p. 218). She points out that in order to defend Slavonic, Khrabār had to create an image of the Slavs different from that in *Vita Methodii*, one in which the authors themselves (Khrabār, but also the author of the *Annunciation of the Gospel*) are not included, given that in those texts the Slavs “are [...] grammatically othered” (“they,” “not ‘us’”, p. 223). The collective “we” in *On Letters* does not refer to the Slavs, but to those who favor the “Slavonic alphabet” (ibid.). These findings will be of great interest not only to philologists concerned with Slavonic texts, but also to general readers of ethnic history. Ivanova is to be commended for the courage to ask uncomfortable questions: “Why is it impossible to contemplate that Slavonic speakers may have preferred not to write Slavonic?” (p. 227).

In the conclusion (pp. 236–242), Ivanova points out that with each one of those three texts (*Vita Constantini*, *Vita Methodii*, and *On Letters*), the inven-

6 The idea of interpreting Khrabār's “lines and scratches” as runes appears in J. Macháček et al.: Runes from Lány (Czech Republic) – The Oldest Inscription Among Slavs. A New Standard for Multidisciplinary Analysis of Runic Bones. In: *Journal of Archaeological Science* 127, 2021 (DOI: 10.1016/j.jas.2021.105333), pp. 1–8, at p. 6. Ivanova cites this article in note 34 of her book, but only to wonder how The New York Times put a spin on “a fairly insignificant discovery” to come up with a “suitably orientalisising title” (p. 11).

tion of Slavonic (which at this point must be understood as both language and script) was reinterpreted and adapted to different political and cultural agendas. In fact, the “process of reinvention continued” well into the modern era, with such peaks as the interest in the Cyrillo-Methodian tradition for the early modern Latin liturgy, the push for pan-Slavonic Cyril and Methodius in Communist Bulgaria, or the “surge in Cyrillo-Methodian veneration in Slovakia after 1989” (p. 239). For, as Ivanova wittingly puts it, “the Slavonic alphabet is still of concern to popes, patriarchs, and political leaders” (p. 240).

The great strength of this book lies in its profoundly innovative approach to the fundamental texts of Slavic Studies, and in their insertion into a historiographic, as opposed to a purely philological framework. Ivanova puts forward quite revisionist interpretations: *Vita Constantini* is a Byzantine (not Slavonic) text produced in Rome; *Vita Methodii* is more Latin than Byzantine (or Slavonic), and promotes a papal, not imperial agenda; *On Letters* is not about the quarrel between Cyrillic and Glagolitic, but about a debate concerning cultural identity. The book also greatly contributes to our understanding of a political triangle (Constantinople-Rome-Bulgaria) so prominent in the history of Europe in the ninth century. Ivanova argues that written (liturgical) languages and scripts employed for them were not secondary, but central to the arguments made by various groups and individuals in that political triangle. She urges scholars to examine Latin, Greek, and Slavonic texts not separately, but in the dialogue and confrontation in which they were situated in the past. All in all, this book will be of great interest to those who want to move the intellectual history of the Middle Ages beyond its sub-disciplinary fragmentation.

Despite its strengths, I found several minor drawbacks to this book. Ivanova often employs the singular (“author”) with a plural pronoun (“their”), for example on page 25. Later, she explains that she uses the plural pronoun “they” to refer to the medieval author, “both as a gender-neutral shorthand, and as a term that carries within it the potential plurality of a textual community” (p. 31). If one feels obliged to go down the gender neutral route of plural pronouns, then these should be accorded a plural verb rather than being treated as an honorary singular. Moreover, there is no evidence of female authors. To put it in blunt terms, there is no Huneburc of Heidenheim in East Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe. The only map (p. XIX)

in this book, which is placed before the introduction, was apparently purchased from the Map Archive.⁷

Its caption reads as follows: “The missions of Saints Cyril and Methodius to the Slavs, 9th century.” Leaving aside the fact that as saints Cyril and Methodius could not have been on any mission, since they became saints after their respective deaths, the map shows Hungary, Serbia, Danelaw, Sweden, and Poland. None of them existed in the ninth century. Some geographical confusion exists also at a smaller scale. Carantania (largely coincident with the province of Carinthia in southern Austria) was never part of Pannonia, either geographically or politically (p. 19). Elsewhere, Ivanova warns her readers that the controversy is still raging over the location of Moravia (pp. 10 and 186). Moreover, she claims that Moravia is associated with the ancestors of the Czechs, proof for that being a Wikipedia entry (p. 19 with n. 70). In reality, no one has ever linked Moravia to the Czech ethnogenesis. The story of how the Czechs came into being politically and conceptually speaking received a superb treatment recently, but there is no chapter on Moravia in that book.⁸ As for the location of Moravia, the last salvo in that controversy is more than a decade old.⁹ Today, the dispute is dead, for as Ivanova points out, Rastislav and Svatopluk’s Moravia “most probably covered territories between modern-day Hungary, Austria, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia” (p. 10). According to Ivanova, “a symbol often associated with the Turkic god Tengri” (p. 11) was often found in Bulgaria. If she has in mind the letter Y between two bars (|Y|), then the symbol in question has long been demonstrated to be Christian, with no relation to Tengrism.¹⁰ Similarly, judging from the evidence in *Vita Constantini*, the ‘Slavonic’ letters were invented

7 <https://themaparchive.com/>.

8 D. Kalhous: Bohemi. Prozesse der Identitätsbildung in frühpřemyslidischen Ländern (bis 1200). Vienna 2018 (Denkschriften der philosophisch-historischen Klasse 510 = Forschungen zur Geschichte des Mittelalters 23). In general, Wikipedia entries are rarely a reflection of the current state of research. They rather illustrate a bizarre mixture of sciolism and socialism.

9 A. Katona-Kiss: Μεγάλη Μοραβία, Svatopluk országa. Hol voltak a morva végek? In: A. P. Kiss/F. Piti/G. Szabados (eds.): Középkortörténeti tanulmányok 7. A VII. Medievisztikai PhD-konferencia (Szeged, 2011. június 1–3.). Szeged 2012, pp. 199–218.

10 G. Dzanev: Rannosrednovkovni khristiianski pametnici ot Abritus (za znachenieto na starobălgarskiia znak /Y/). In: Pliska-Prešov 8, 2000, pp. 224–228; R. Rashev: Oshte za khristiianskiia smisla na niakoi “prabălgarski” znaci. In: I. Karaiotov/I. Jordanov/R. Rashev/N. Nedelchev (eds.): Iubileen sbornik v chest na doc. d-r Stoitian

before Constantine (and his brother, Methodius) went to Moravia, so in Constantinople, not in Moravia (p. 12). At one point, Ivanova claims that Glagolitic inscriptions have been found across the Balkans, as well as in northeastern Bulgaria (p. 226). However, she also believes that the Slavonic alphabet was “transmitted to Russia from Macedonian soil” (p. 37). Even if one would give all the credit to Ohrid for the dissemination of Slavonic culture, there is no reason to discard the possibility that Preslav, not Ohrid was the source of the Slavonic language and alphabet(s) that reached Rus’ in the eleventh century. After all, Glagolitic inscriptions have also been found in the lands of medieval Rus’.¹¹

There are occasional errors and typos: “which unclear” (p. 58) instead of ‘which is unclear’; “Uspenskii miscellanea” (p. 111) instead of ‘Uspenskii miscellany’; “Celestine’s absence” (p. 122) instead of ‘the pope’s absence’; “saints themselves saints” (p. 151) instead of ‘saints themselves’; Theophylact is described as “patriarch of all Bulgaria” (p. 182), instead of Archbishop of Ohrid; “does follows” (p. 193) instead of ‘does follow’; “Balatons” (p. 214) instead of ‘Balaton’; “Daphopates” (p. 232) instead of ‘Daphnopates’.

That should not detract from the importance of this book. It is elegant, original, expansive. A very impressive monograph by a sharp intellect, it should be read by everyone with an interest in the intellectual history of the Middle Ages.

Vitlianov po sluchai negovata 60-godishnina. Shumen 2008, pp. 25–31; M. Inkova: Za khristiianskata simbolika na znaka “ipsilon” v starobalgarskata kultura. In: Problemi na izkustvoto 3, 2014, pp. 3–10.

11 A. A. Gippius/S. M. Mikheev: Drevnerusskie glagolicheskie nadpisi-graffiti XI–XII vekov iz Novgoroda, no. 30–55. In: Slovo 72, 2022, pp. 47–92.

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