

MIRELA IVANOVA, *Inventing Slavonic*. Cultures of Writing between Rome and Constantinople (Oxford Studies in Byzantium). Oxford: Oxford University Press 2024. 247 pp. – ISBN 978-0-19-889150-5

- VLADISLAV KNOLL, Czech Academy of Sciences (knoll@slu.cas.cz)

In early 2024, a book with the intriguing title *Inventing Slavonic* was published by MIRELA IVANOVA of the University of Sheffield. According to its abstract, it ‘offers a new reading of the invention of the Slavonic alphabet’ and ‘goes against the grain of modern scholarship and popular common sense’. It also argues that ‘the alphabet was not invented once, but it continued to be contested and redefined’.

If you are unfamiliar with the author’s previous work, it will take you some time to understand from this synopsis what her book is really about. Based on the title, one might think that IVANOVA follows FLORIN CURTA’s and SORIN PALIGA’s reinterpretation of early Slavic history – but this is not the case. As ‘alphabet’ is often mentioned at the beginning (e.g. pp. 4–6), one would expect the book to belong to the rich scholarly literature on the origins and development of the Glagolitic and Cyrillic script – yet no scholar working on this subject is cited in the bibliography. The introduction, which accounts for about one-sixth of the volume, repeatedly warns that we shall be confronted with a ‘completely new’ (this phrase appears very often) approach to the subject of an alphabet’s ‘inventing’ and ‘re-inventing’. This lengthy overture is obviously intended to arouse the readers’ interest.

A conservative Central European would probably stop reading half-way through IVANOVA’s preface and dismiss her work as just ‘another bizarre theory’. That would be a pity, because hers is a very interesting and inspiring book. It is not really about the invention or reinvention of the Slavonic language or alphabet, but about three texts that are fundamental for the early history of Slavic literacy: *The Life of Constantine* (*Vita Constantini*, VC), *The Life of Methodius* (*Vita Methodii*, VM), and the treatise *On Letters* (OL). There is nothing shocking about IVANOVA’s monograph: she offers a traditional yet brilliant analysis of these three sources, whose intellectual background and audience she reconstructs. Her research is based on thorough study of the primary material and draws on the reliable findings of leading scholars.

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At several points, IVANOVA contrasts her conclusions with modern perceptions of Cyril and Methodius and celebrations of their invention of a new alphabet. She writes that the memory of the two brothers' mission is both pan-Slavic (p. 37) and nationalised (p. 40), while national academies are spaces of 'national-hegemonic opinions'. These and similar barbs are, as one would expect, mostly directed at scholarship and popular thinking in Bulgaria, but in several places the author assumes that received opinions in the Czech Republic would be about the same. Since I work at the Czech Academy of Sciences, I think I might as well address some of the author's references to Czech scholars and the Czech public. This will serve to clarify my own attitude to her book.

Received opinions are mainly formed through schooling. The Cyrillo-Methodian Mission is treated in the fourth, seventh, tenth, and eleventh grades as part of the Czech history and literature curriculum. Our textbooks present Cyril and Methodius as two intellectuals coming from Greece with a new literary language – Old Church Slavonic (*staroslověnština*), which temporarily replaced the established literary language of the Czech Middle Ages – Latin.¹ The eleventh-grade history textbook by the renowned historian PETR ČORNEJ states that the concession of a Slavonic liturgy was conceived from the beginning as temporary, for missionary purposes only. All textbooks mention the creation of a specific script – Glagolitic, created either by Constantine or (according to the textbook for the highest class) by both Constantine and Methodius (!). Any pupil can see from the illustrations that this script 'looks like nothing familiar': the textbook for the fourth grade comments on this by saying that as a consequence of the expulsion of the disciples of Cyril and Methodius 'we' use the Latin script. (At that moment, a student may feel grateful for not having to learn a strange alphabet.) This same textbook does mention that disciples of the two brothers fled to other countries (Bulgaria, Croatia), but it is only the tenth-grade one that reveals for the first time, in a text-box, that in Bulgaria the Glagolitic

1. MAGDALENA KONEČNÁ, *Vlastivěda 4: porozumění v souvislostech. Pro 4. ročník základní školy*. Brno 2023, p. 20; ALŽBĚTA MATOUŠOVÁ et al., *Hravá literatura 7. Pro 7. ročník ZŠ a víceletá gymnázia*. Prague 2016, p. 35; KARLA PRÁTOVÁ et al., *Dějepis 7: středověk, počátek novověku. Učebnice pro 7. ročník základní školy a sekundy víceletého gymnázia*. Brno 2023, 7; LUKÁŠ BOROVIČKA et al. *Nová literatura 1 pro střední školy*. Brno 2018, p. 56; PETER ČORNEJ et al., *Dějepis pro gymnázia a střední školy. 2, Středověk a raný novověk*. Prague 2001, p. 18.

script was replaced by Cyrillic, ‘the basis of the Russian *azbuka*’.² It goes on to state that the Moravian Mission had a pan-Slavic significance (*všeslovanský význam*).

As a whole, the activity of Cyril and Methodius is assessed very positively. The seventh-grade literature textbook says that their work was ‘the basis of the literature of our culture’ (*základy písemnictví naší kultury*).³ While that same textbook states that the short Old Church Slavonic episode was ended by the Pope of Rome, the eleventh-grade one argues that the Latin orientation determined by the Moravian ruler himself. The continuity of Slavonic written culture in Bohemia is briefly mentioned in the tenth and eleventh-grade textbooks. In the literature textbook, this forms part of an analysis of the late tenth-century *Legenda Christiani*, which is explained as a Latin apologia for Slavonic written culture. The eleventh-grade textbook mentions that Slavic liturgy survived in the Czech lands till ca. 1100. The international repercussion of the Cyrillo-Methodian Mission are presented in secondary education very weakly, as an unintended side effect. In general, the mission is highlighted as a glorious prelude to our ‘national culture’, but with a premature failure. The survival of Slavonic letters in Bohemia is treated as a marginal phenomenon: all textbooks state that the language of medieval culture was Latin. Czech textbooks lack the concept of the two brothers as saints. This can be illustrated by a cartoon in the tenth-grade textbook (for students aged 15–16), which shows two men resembling ancient Greek gods surrounded by half-naked women, drinking ouzo in Greece and beer in Moravia. The activity of the brothers is also caricatured in the popular ironic-historical cartoon *Opráski sčeskí historje* (Pictures from Czech History).

A slightly different image of Cyril and Methodius prevails in the (actually not very influential) Czech religious communities. Despite declarative references to the Cyrillo-Methodian tradition as a doctrinal source for the modern Czechoslovak Hussite Church,⁴ the cult of Cyril and Methodius in the Czech milieu is mostly associated with Roman Catholicism. The Czech feast of Cyril and Methodius on 5 June was instituted by Pope Leo XIII’s 1880 encyclical *Grande Munus*, whose declared aim was to celebrate ‘the magnificent association of the Slavic nation and the Roman church, an association with the noblest beginnings’. This feast immediately precedes

2. BOROVIČKA et al. *Nová literatura*, p. 57.

3. MATOUŠOVÁ et al., *Hravá literatura*, p. 35.

4. See its *Statute* (*Ústava CČSH*) published in 2008.

(which may have been the Pope's goal) the commemoration of John Hus (6 June), the main protagonist of the Czech Reformation. Thus, at the beginning of each summer, the media announce a major Roman Catholic event centred on Velehrad in Moravia – followed by a Hussite event centred on Prague. This also corresponds to the fact that the legacy of Cyril and Methodius is perceived differently in Bohemia (lukewarm interest)⁵ and Moravia (regional pride).

Of course, there is also a scholarly interpretation of Cyril and Methodius. It is based on JOSEF VAŠICA's canon of texts attributed to the 'Great Moravian period',⁶ supported by editions of Slavonic and Latin sources in the series *Magnae Moraviae fontes historici*⁷ and by VLADIMIR VAVŘÍNEK's detailed interpretation of the Cyrill's and Methodius' vitae.⁸ Within this scholarly tradition, what MIRELA IVANOVA says about disputes between Czech and Bulgarian scholars about localising texts (p. 40) is very true, and I cannot disagree with her assertion of 'national-hegemonic opinions' in the national academies. However, there is an important difference between the Czech and Bulgarian milieus: whereas in Bulgaria the Cyrillo-Methodian theme still has great importance, in Czech scholarship, apart from VLADIMÍR VAVŘÍNEK, practically no scholar (except for archaeologists) concentrates on it. The focus of the few active Paleoslavists (not counting the pure lexicography and etymology) is on later periods: the tenth and eleventh centuries (FRANTIŠEK ČAJKA, MIROSLAV VEPŘEK, KATEŘINA SPURNÁ), and then the fourteenth and fifteenth-century Slavic monastery in Prague (VÁCLAV ČERMÁK). The natural focus of the main contingent of Czech medievalists is Latin culture, which results in neglect or underestimation of Church Slavonic episodes in Central European culture. Incidentally, Czech Paleoslavists are usually recruited from among qualified Latinists, which explains the current scholarly focus on the coexistence of Latin and Church Slavonic.

This approach of our lay and academic public to the Cyrillo-Methodian tra-

5. In fact, I cannot think of a statue or even a public image of Cyril and Methodius in Bohemia (except perhaps in the Eastern Orthodox milieu, which is marginal in the Czech context).

6. JOSEF VAŠICA, *Literární památky epochy velkomoravské, 863–885*. Prague ¹1966, ²1996.

7. DAGMAR BARTOŇKOVÁ et al. (eds.), *Magnae Moraviae fontes historici / Prameny k dějinám Velké Moravy*. 4 vols. Brno ¹1966-1977, ²2008-2019.

8. VLADIMIR VAVŘÍNEK, *Cyrl a Metoděj mezi Konstantinopolí a Římem*. Prague ¹2013 ²2023. In the footnotes below, I always cite the second edition of 2023.

dition probably results from geopolitical and cultural attitudes: in the post-1989 Czech mind, anything associated with Pan-Slavism or questioning the Czechs' embeddedness in Western culture might be suspected of being pro-Russian. As VEPŘEK has shown, this can also affect the scholarly approach to the continuity of Slavic written culture in Bohemia after the death of Methodius.⁹ It also underlies media interpretation of the discovery of Germanic runes in a Slavic settlement from around 600 in south-eastern Moravia, ironically commented on by IVANOVA (p. 11): runes, in this context signifying 'the West', were interpreted as something that preceded a culture coming from 'the East'. Sometimes one might think that the Czechs (or at least the Bohemians) prefer to be 'pan-Celtic' rather than 'pan-Slavic'.

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Having explained my 'discursive milieu' in detail, I return to MIRELA IVANOVA's book. As I mentioned, it analyses three texts. It does that in order to find answers to three questions (p. 25):

What is the source of the text, i.e., what texts were used to compose it?

What is the 'discursive milieu' in which this text was produced?

For whom was the text originally intended?

IVANOVA concludes that VC, VM, and OL were written in different places, in different environments, and with different aims, and that these texts subsequently continued to circulate independently. *Vita Constantini*, according to her, originated within the Greek community in Rome between 869–885 (p. 75). It was initially composed in Greek (the idea which, as IVANOVA notes, is current in modern scholarship) and was addressed to the intellectual circles of Constantinople. Its purpose was not to defend the use of one's own language in religion (as stated by VAVŘÍNEK),¹⁰ but to justify, within the ongoing discussion in the Byzantine intellectual milieu, the compatibility of classical education and orthodoxy (p. 51). The form of VC work roughly corresponds to the vitae of Byzantine travelling saints. Following VAVŘÍNEK,¹¹ IVANOVA characterises it as a 'propagation of the Byzantine imperial agenda' (p. 45), which slightly undermines her own thesis of the work's purely internal Byzantine context. Since the text has survived

9. MIROSLAV VEPŘEK, *Czech Church Slavonic in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries*. Munich 2022, p. 19.

10. VAVŘÍNEK, *Cytil a Metoděj*, p. 287.

11. VAVŘÍNEK, *Cytil a Metoděj*, p. 299.

only in Slavonic, with no trace of a cult of Cyril in the Greek environment, the presumed Greek original of VC obviously did not reach its intended audience.

IVANOVA believes (in agreement, incidentally, with the view prevalent in the Czech Republic) that the *Vita Methodii* was written in Moravia between 885–907. Its aim was the ‘defence of Methodius’ legitimacy in Moravia and Pannonia’ (p. 24). It formed a direct response to the Latin *Conversio Bagoariorum et Carantanorum* (from the 870s). To counter the long tradition of missionary activity documented in the *Conversio*, VM stresses the authority of the Pope, the personal bond between Methodius and Cyril, their good relations with the Roman Church, above all, the local people’s sympathy for the two brothers. IVANOVA suggests that VM was written so that papal support would continue ‘by the election of Methodius’ chosen successor, Gorazd’. In pursuit of this aim, the author of VM did not hesitate to modify his Byzantine sources, emphasising the leading role of the Pope in the history of the Christian Church, and to fabricate a non-existent letter of Hadrian II by adapting an existing letter of John VIII. IVANOVA’s interpretation of the vita’s ideological background and aim correspond to the that of VAVŘÍNEK, who, however, defined the text’s target group more clearly: according to him, the VM was addressed to the Moravian establishment in order to support Slavonic priests in their polemics with the Latin clergy.¹² IVANOVA rather obliquely suggests that VM was addressed to the Pope (p. 152). The logical consequence of such a thesis, as in the case of VC, would be to assume the existence of a lost Latin original for VM. Such an assertion probably seemed too radical to the author – though I would not see anything shocking in it, especially considering that the addressee in both VAVŘÍNEK’s and IVANOVA’s concepts is the pro-Latin party. As in the case of VC, the text did not achieve its intended purpose.

Traditionally, the target audience of the treatise *On Letters* is considered to be the Greek clergy of the First Bulgarian Empire, opposed to the competition of a new literary language. In 1964, the Czech scholar VOJTĚCH TKADLČÍK suggested that OL was actually a defence of the Glagolitic script against the Cyrillic one.¹³ Both views are cited in influential Czech and Bulgarian publications.¹⁴ As before, a question of the choice of the

12. VAVŘÍNEK, Cyril a Metoděj, pp. 292, 297.

13. VOJTĚCH TKADLČÍK, Le moine Chrabr et l’écriture slave. *Byzantinoslavica* 25 (1964) pp. 75–92.

14. VAVŘÍNEK, Cyril a Metoděj, p. 338; ANA STOJKOVA, Храбър. In: ANISAVA MILTENOVA (ed.), *История на българската средновековна литература*. Sofia 2009,

original language arises, viz., why write in Slavonic for Greek addressees? IVANOVA offers a compromise: the text was addressed to ‘bilingual monastic circles in the Balkans’ as a ‘reaction to some Slavonic speakers resisting using Slavonic’. As an argument for this thesis, IVANOVA offers a fine sociolinguistic analysis of tenth-century Bulgaria, pointing to the fact that Greek was still used in various spheres long after disciples of Cyril and Methodius had arrived in the country. She makes very pertinent arguments about the prestige of the Greek language and an understandable fear of the Bulgarian monastic establishment that sacred texts and liturgy might be corrupted through translation. By listing the persistence of Greek in various contexts, IVANOVA actually questions the success of OL. Her interpretation seems to me adequate, although it does not fully resolve the question of the work’s original language – why would someone who denies using Slavonic read a Slavonic treatise. Again, I think that IVANOVA’s argument assumes the existence of a Greek version of the text.

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I said at the beginning that IVANOVA’s approach is strictly literary – ultimately, one could classify it as *Quellenkunde*. From this point of view, her work is truly innovative and offers many interesting and inspiring insights. For example, it uncovers that OL depended on the *Grammar* of Dionysios Thrax and its scholia (p. 196) and that the VM was inspired by the Latin vitae of missionary bishops. Pointing out the literary origin of the proverbial ‘lines and scratches’ preceding the Glagolitic script (also used as an argument in the Czech runes affair) steals the thunder from many popular theories about ancient Slavonic literacy. In an original, if perhaps somewhat artificial, move, IVANOVA outlines the complex literary structure in the VC, seeing it as a kind of *Bildungsroman* (p. 54).

The consequence of concentrating on three individual texts is that several issues which are not directly relevant to their analysis but would be important if the book were really about ‘inventing Slavonic’, are either completely ignored or just briefly mentioned. The whole question of the literary legacy of Cyril and Methodius is closed with the aforesaid witty remark about disputes between Czech and Bulgarian scholars and the assertion that ‘on a number of occasions a text considered original or Moravian has been discovered to be a compilation of extant Greek texts, dated

pp. 248–251, at p. 250.

to the tenth-century Balkans', referring to a recent article by ANATOLIJ TURILOV (though the results of TURILOV's work are in fact slightly different and he even extends VAŠICA's list mentioned above).¹⁵ In this particular case, I understand that IVANOVA did not wish to join the debate on the beginning of Slavonic literacy and, in particular, on the provenance of the oldest preserved Glagolitic manuscript, the Kyiv Folia, which a previous generation of Czech scholars would move ever closer to the Cyrillo-Methodian period – until RADOSLAV VEČERKA finally proclaimed it an original from 868/869.¹⁶ (This interpretation is at odds with ones proposed outside the Czech Republic.)

Another case of superficial treatment concerns the polemic about the continuity of the Cyrillo-Methodian tradition in Bohemia (p. 179). I think IVANOVA could have been more rigorous in simply excluding topics that fall outside her purview. As it is, she quickly closes the issue by denying the originality of the tenth-century Slavonic legends from Bohemia, citing a single work, in English, by the leading Czech historian DUŠAN TŘEŠTÍK, who once wrote that the continuity of the Cyrillo-Methodian tradition is a 'construction adopted by communist ideologists'.¹⁷ The arguments most frequently adduced in favour of continuity are the bilingual (Slavonic and Latin) education of St Wencelas mentioned in his first vita, the translatio of the Cyrillo-Methodian tradition described in the late tenth-century *Legenda Christiani*, and the eleventh-century foundation of the Sázava Monastery by a Benedictine monk of Czech origin with a Slavonic education (as in the oldest vita). In 1988, the dependence of the First Life of Wenceslas on the VM was demonstrated.¹⁸ The Russian-American scholar VIKTOR ŽIVOV paints a fascinating picture of the early (tenth to eleventh-centuries) international Slavonic culture (*Slavia Christiana*), exchanging the fruits of both Latin and Byzantine learning: this suggests a bilingual/bicultural character of early Central European culture until the end of the eleventh century.¹⁹

15. A. A. TURILOV, К изучению великоморавского литературного наследия: промежуточные итоги, спорные вопросы и перспективы. Вестник славянских культур 35/1 (2015) pp. 130–152.

16. RADOSLAV VEČERKA, The Kiev Fragments and Great Moravia. In: PAVEL KOUŘIL (ed.), The Cyril and Methodius Mission and Europe: 1150 Years since the Arrival of the Thessaloniki Brothers in Great Moravia. Brno 2014, pp. 262–265.

17. This whole polemic is explained in English by VEPŘEK, Czech Church Slavonic, p. 19.

18. VÁCLAV KONZAL, První slovanská legenda václavská a její 'sitz im Leben'. Studia mediaevalia Pragensia 1 (1988) pp. 113–127

19. V. M. ŽIVOV, История языка русской письменности. Vol. 1. Moscow 2017,

IVANOVA summarily deals with the problematic authorship of the versified Prologue (*Proglas*) to the Gospels (p. 219). This is also a polemical issue and nicely illustrates the ‘competition’ between Czech and Bulgarian scholars. Within the Czech discourse, VAŠICA’s canon ascribes both prefaces to Constantine-Cyril and thus to Central Europe, which in the case of the fully preserved version was confirmed by VAVŘÍNEK. Surprisingly, the philologist RADOSLAV VEČERKA seems to prefer the opinion supported by IVANOVA that the work could have been written by a later Bulgarian monk, also called Constantine. In school textbooks, the text is attributed to Constantine-Cyril. In the Czech mind, the *Proglas* forms the beginning of our national literature and is traditionally included in Czech Bible editions. In contrast to the brief mention or complete omission of topics related to the ‘inventing of Slavonic’, there are long excursuses on Arabic and other foreign cultures, which I understand as reflecting the current scholarly interest in globalism.

IVANOVA’s brief treatment of the Greek *Life of Clement of Ohrid* (p. 188) is, on the other hand, adequate. She argues fairly that the model text was Slavonic, but its original idea has been practically lost due to later doctrinal reworking. The author’s strictly literary, source-oriented approach also leads to scepticism about the historicity of events that may find a rhetorical explanation (such as some episodes of the VC: the meeting with the Patriarch John VII, the translation of the calix inscription) and of passages from the early life of Methodius that are not included in the VC. This contrasts with the usual approach of historians, who tend to treat the two vitae as historical documents.

IVANOVA repeatedly expressed doubt about the participation of Methodius in the first phase of the Cyrillo-Methodian Mission (pp. 105, 108, 112, 126–128). Without actually claiming that Methodius came to Moravia only after Constantine’s death, she seems to think that his absence from descriptions of mission’s first phase undermines the legitimacy of celebrating the two brothers as a ‘holy pair’.²⁰ However, from a literary point of view, one could argue that mentioning Methodius in the VC may not have been

pp. 134–138.

20. IVANOVA may be thinking in particular of the iconic images of the two (lonely!) missionaries arriving before the Moravian duke Rastislav. Incidentally, I do not understand why she refers to Rastislav’s nephew as *Sviatopluk*. It is difficult to choose a form with reference to a specific modern language, but instead of creating an imaginary one, I would have followed one of the Slavonic or Latin primary sources – or at least explained the reason for my decision.

important for the purpose of this text. If the ‘Reichenau signatures’ are authentic, as IVANOVA accepts (p. 140), a number of Greeks must have accompanied the mission’s main protagonists. In any case, neither the primary sources nor modern scholars attribute the creation of the Slavonic alphabet and written language to Methodius: if we are to believe VM, the older brother’s role at this stage was rather passive.²¹ Even so, nobody denies the importance of Methodius in the Moravian Mission as a whole – if not together with Constantine, then at least as a direct continuator of his work, whose merit was to achieve institutionalisation and fortify his brother’s legacy by educating numerous Slavic clergy.²² I do not feel that IVANOVA’s interpretation undermines the concept of ‘two fathers’ of Slavonic literacy.

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To conclude, *Inventing Slavonic* is an extremely interesting work that brings many inspiring and fresh ideas. Its author shows admirable erudition in both Byzantine and Latin sources, which allows her to reveal previously unnoticed connections between them. She pays attention to details that, after reading her book, seem obvious but were neglected by other scholars. She formulates her objectives clearly (although not from the very beginning) and keeps her focus on them.

IVANOVA’s book is also very interesting from a meta-discursive point of view, as it illustrates current trends in Anglophone scholarship and the way in which local scholarly discourses are being internationalised. A most striking aspect is the use of bombastic language, especially in the introductory part, and the misleading title, which pretends, in the currently fashionable way, that a uni-disciplinary book, even if very seriously conceived, will provide universal, revolutionary revelations. I am prepared to believe that such an approach can be successful in the UK or the US, but I fear that it might, unfortunately, impede the work’s reception among more conservative Central European scholars. IVANOVA’s style and rhetoric indicate

21. VAVŘÍNEK, Cyril a Metoděj, p. 291.

22. This idea of ‘succession of initiatives’ is actually present in the aforesaid *Legenda Christini*. The first phase of the mission is entirely in Cyril’s hands, without any mention of Methodius. Upon departing for Rome (where he died), Cyril left (*relinquens supra memoratis in partibus*) his brother in Moravia to continue his work. Then the rich activity of Methodius is described. The text does not imply that Methodius had not previously been in Moravia. JAROSLAV LUDVÍKOVSKÝ (ed.), *Legenda Christiani. Vita et passio Sancti Wenceslai et sancte Ludmile ave eius*. Prague 2012, pp. 13–15.

that her main ‘target audience’ are Anglo-Americans and Bulgarians; this is also reflected in her bibliography, which clearly favours titles in English and Bulgarian. From my own regional perspective, IVANOVA’s conclusions do not challenge received opinion in the Czech Republic, but her book provides interesting insights about the image and intellectual background of the pioneers of Slavonic letters. I therefore warmly recommend it to a wide audience.

Keywords

early Slavs; Moravian Mission