Central Europe’s Writing Systems in the Ninth Century

Writing is the foundational technology for shaping speech into languages (Einzelsprachen). In the ninth century the stratum of literati, or people with a command of writing, was narrow and largely contained to the former territories of the Roman Empire south of the Danube and to the Frankish Kingdom in the west. The sole extant traditions of writing, which left considerable numbers of codex-style manuscripts (or books as we know them), was limited at that time to the Greek language written in the Greek alphabet, the Latin language written in the Latin alphabet, the Hebrew language written in the Hebrew abjad (consonantry), and the Arabic language written in the Arabic abjad. These four traditions of literacy were intimately connected to the interrelated monotheistic (Abrahamic) religions of Eastern (Orthodox) Christianity, Western (Roman Catholic) Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. These four different languages and corresponding writing systems were connected to the respective “holy books,” namely, the Greek language original of the New Testament (alongside the Septuagint, or the canonical Greek translation of the Old Testament), the Vulgate (or the canonical Latin translation of the Bible), the Pentateuch (Torah), and the Quran. The faithful of these four religions were expected to pay utmost respect to their respective holy book. Through the practice of regular worship and inscriptions adorning churches, synagogues, or mosques, they could immediately recognize a given holy book by the sight of its writing system, without actually knowing how to read or write it. This or that writing system became a readily recognizable marker or “brand” of a given religion.

Three of these traditions of religion-based literacies—Greek, Latin, and Arabic—were connected to the polities of the (Eastern) Roman Empire (Romania), the (Carolingian East) Frankish Kingdom, and the (Abbasid) Islamic Caliphate, respectively. The Jewish tradition of Judaist literacy existed in diaspora spread out across all the three empires. During the ninth century, in the vast majority of cases literacy was limited to (better educated) clergy, especially in the Frankish Empire. Otherwise, the skill of writing and reading was the preserve of the ruling elite and rich in Romania (not to be confused with today’s Romance-speaking nation-state of Romania) and the Caliphate. In practice, all these literate groups consisted (almost) exclusively of men. It appears that literacy, as motivated by the needs of worship, was most widely spread among Jews, where it was even more strictly limited to men than among the rich in the Roman Empire or the Islamic Caliphate.

The Latin language- and alphabet-based literacy of the Frankish Kingdom overlapped with the (West) Romance dialect continuum and the southern half of the Germanic dialect continuum (see Map 1). The successful eastward expansion of this kingdom introduced some Slavophone ethnic groups to this literacy. The Frankish Kingdom’s persistent influence east of its borders convinced the rulers of Greater Moravia to adopt this Latin literacy in the mid-880s. Greek language- and alphabet-based literacy overlapped with the Greek dialect continuum in Romania, the northernmost reaches of the expanding Arabic dialect continuum (in the Romanian-Caliphate Condominium of Cyprus), the southernmost reaches of the West Romance dialect continuum in the very south of the Apennine Peninsula, the Albanian and East Romance dialect continua in the zone contested between Romania and the Bulgarian Empire and with much of the Slavic dialect continuum in this empire itself. The Arabic language- and script-based literacy was limited to the (East) Roman-Caliphate Condominium of Cyprus, but its cultural and political influence was increasingly felt across the Mediterranean in Romania and the southern half of the Frankish Kingdom due to the Caliphate’s numerous successful (though often relatively short-lived) annexations of Mediterranean islands (Balearic Islands, Crete, Cyprus, Sardinia, or Sicily), alongside some bridgeheads in Apulia and Calabria in the south of the Apennine Peninsula and in Lower Burgundy (or today’s southern France). Obviously, the core of this lasting Islamic influence across Europe was Al-Andalus, or the Iberian Peninsula seized by the Caliphate in the early eighth century. It remained part of the Islamic world for seven centuries until 1492.

The Hebrew language- and script-based literacy has no representation on Map 1 devoted to Central Europe’s dialect continua, because in everyday life Jews tended to adopt the speech (dialect, language) of their surroundings. However, their literacy had a significant impact on the economic, political, and cultural development of Central Europe. During the second half of the First Millennium, Jewish merchants, known in sources as Radhanites (רכהיים Radhanim), participated in and maintained trade routes that spanned Eurasia from Iberia (and North Africa) to China. They also ventured into the central and northern areas of Central Europe sparsely populated by Baltic, Slavic, Finno-Ugric, and Turkic ethnic groups with their traditional polities outside the reach of the Frankish Kingdom or Romania. The spread-out presence of the Hebrew abjad depicted on the map marks the regions where Jews lived in both the polities,
and where the Rhadanite merchants roamed. Their and other Jewish specialists’ rare skill of writing was appreciated in the area north of the Danube and east of the Frankish Kingdom, where prior to the ninth century this technology was utterly unknown. Not surprisingly, many early (twelfth to thirteenth century) coins from this region (especially from Poland, but also some from Hungary) bear inscriptions in local languages but executed in Hebrew letters. The rulers entrusted minting of coinage to Jewish mint masters.

Varangians (Norsemen, Vikings), apart from being fierce warriors and successful looters, also excelled—like Radhanites—at establishing and maintaining new successful trade routes. In Central Europe their enterprise is best illustrated by the trade route known as “from the Varangians to the Greeks,” namely from southern Sweden across the Gulf of Finland, and southward along the Rivers Lovat’ and Dnieper to the Black Sea and alongside the western coast to the Romanian capital of Constantinople. The rudimentary Runic alphabet (originally derived from the Latin script) was mainly used for brief texts incised on wood or stone. Petroglyphs (stone inscriptions) are strewn across Scandinavia and along the aforementioned route. Hence, the sparse presence of Runes is marked in these areas on the map.

The (Old) Turkic (“Runic”) script is eerily similar to the Norsemen’s Runes, but its origin is different. The similarity is a side-effect of identical uses and ways of executing inscriptions on wood or stone through incisions. This Turkic script probably stems from the Pahlavi and Sogdian alphabets employed for writing languages used along the trade routes from China to Persia (or the so-called Silk Route). North of these routes the Great Steppe extended from Manchuria to Crimea and along the Danube to today’s Hungarian Plain, located between the Carpathians and the Alps. Pastoralist Turkic ethnic groups from Central Asia and Finno-Ugric ones from Siberia roamed around this western terminus of the Eurasian Steppe, and spread the use of this rudimentary script, which survived among Transylvania’s ethnic Hungarians (or Szeklers) well into the early modern period. In the 2010s this so-called “Old Hungarian Alphabet” (Rovásírás) was revived in Hungary for symbolic uses, mainly for parallel road signs with the names of towns and villages. The current populist-cum-authoritarian Hungarian government (since 2010) approves of and supports this script on the lauded understanding that it encapsulates and reflects values of the Hungarian nation.

The Varangians brought the technology of Western European (Scandinavian) statehood to the easternmost reaches of Central Europe, which became the foundation of Rus’ with its capital at Kyiv. The polity’s name preserves the old Finno-Ugric term Ruytstj (in the Finnish spelling) or Rootstj (in the Estonian spelling) for Norsemen from Sweden. In turn, this term is derived from the Old Norse adjectival term rofis- for “related to rowing.” Varangians came from across the sea on ships propelled by oars and rowers, so in the eyes of Finno-Ugric-speakers, in today’s southern Finland and Estonia, they were “Rowers.”

The early development of Rus’ as a polity is connected to the tradition of (Old Church) Slavonic literacy that closely copied Romania’s model of Greek literacy. The decisive spread of (Western or Eastern) Roman-style statehood to the northern half of Central Europe was connected to the eastward expansion of the Frankish Kingdom and to this polity’s and its competitor, Romania’s, Christianizing efforts. Unlike the Frankish Kingdom, at that time Romania had to defend itself against invaders, and in Central Europe suffered territorial losses at the hands of Bulgaria and Rus’. In spite of their military successes, the rulers of both polities knew that in order to be accepted as (potential) equals among the “Romans” (be it in Romania or the Frankish Kingdom) they had to adopt Christianity as their main ideology of statehood and power legitimation. Otherwise, the survival of their realms and succession within their dynasties would be always imperiled by these two Roman superpowers. Rulers of Greater Moravia arrived at the same conclusion having witnessed the subjugation of neighboring Slavic ethnic groups by the expanding Frankish Empire.

Both Greater Moravia and Bulgaria adopted Christianity from Constantinople at the same time in the mid-860s. The difference was that to Bulgaria Christianity came complete with Greek literacy. Perhaps the Romanian ruling elite saw Bulgaria founded on the historically Roman territories as part of Romania, at least in the ecclesiastic sense, if not politically. In Greater Moravia, located outside the Roman Empire’s traditional boundaries, Romanian missionaries, Cyril and Methodius, developed an indigenous Slavic tradition of literacy. First, they devised a Slavic alphabet, known as Glagolitic, which drew at a variety of sources (for instance, the Coptic, Greek, Hebrew, or Samaritan scripts). Then a program of translating the New Testament and other liturgical material and ecclesiastical books from Greek to Slavonic began. The experiment ended abruptly in 885. The Frankish rulers loathed to tolerate this extension of Romanian political and cultural influence on their eastern border, even if it was highly indirect. Slavonic was replaced with Latin and the clergy with the command of Slavonic written in Glagolitic letters left for Bulgaria. But Glagolitic-based Slavonic ecclesiastical literacy survived in what later became Croatia until the turn of the twentieth century, and in some Czech and Polish monasteries until the fourteenth century. Glagolitic also made a brief appearance in Rus’ during the first half of the eleventh century. Similar to Hungary’s case of Rovásírás (“Notch-like script”) it is currently being revived for political ends. In independent Croatia, Glagolitic has been promoted as the country’s “national script” since the 1990s. However, its use is limited to brief parallel illustration-like Glagolitic texts on monuments. People do not aspire actively read or write in Glagolitic-based Croatian, as they do in Rovásírás-based Hungarian.

Slavonic literati expelled from Greater Moravia found a safe haven in Bulgaria. The country’s rulers saw Christianity as an instrument for legitimizing and wielding power effectively, and so they sought effective control of the religion. To this end they sought to make Bulgaria into a self-governing archeparchy in 870. It was the first step. Greater Moravian expellees were convinced to drop Glagolitic and develop a new script closely modelled on the prestigious Greek alphabet. (Nowadays it is known as Cyrillic in memory of Saint Cyril, who did not invent Cyrillic.) Afterward they completed the translation and copy-
siastical books into Slavonic. In the wake of this achievement, Romanian Greek-language clergy became redundant and were expelled from Bulgaria in 893. The Cyrillic-based Slavonic replaced Greek in the function of the liturgical and the state’s official language. In 919 the autocephaly (institutional independence) of the Bulgarian (Orthodox) Church was announced. After a series of military losses to Bulgaria, Romania reluctantly conceded to the existence of the Bulgarian Patriarchy (autocephalous Church) only in a 927 treaty. At present, following Bulgaria’s accession to the European Union in 2007, this country promotes itself with the slogan that Cyrillic is Bulgaria’s “gift to the world.” This slogan was tangibly vindicated when Bulgarian-language Cyrillic inscriptions were added to the new series of Euro banknotes in 2013.