

On the Triune God in Letters

Dr. Milica Lukić, Full Professor

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek
Department of Croatian Language and Literature

Abstract

The paper uses the example of a short illustration of the first three tripartitely coded letters of the Glagolitic script – *azъ, buky, vědě / vědi* – to show that it is a script of Christian orientation. According to the prevailing belief in philology, this philosophical-symbolic script was compiled in the second half of the 9th century by Greek intellectual Constantine Cyril the Philosopher, who was entrusted with the mission of completing the process of Christianization among the (Moravian) Slavs. With their shape, numerical value, name, and symbolism, the selected first three letters of the Glagolitic script tell the story of the Christian Triune God – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Keywords: script, Glagolitic azbuki, Constantine Cyril the Philosopher, Christianity

Introduction

Among the world's writing systems, there is one which directly testifies to the Christian worldview. Today, this – Slavic – writing system is known as the Glagolitic script. The prevailing belief is that it was compiled in the second half of the 9th century by Constantine Cyril the Philosopher, Greek intellectual from Thessaloniki, venerated today as a saint both by the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. This script, azbuki by the order of its letters (a, b, v, g, d...), was composed for the needs of spreading Christianity among the Slavs in Moravia, and became the unique script of all Slavs, spreading together with the Old (Church) Slavic language. In most Slavic peoples, the Glagolitic script ceased to be used by the 12th century, except in a part of Croatia, where it lived on in liturgy until the end of the 19th century. The Glagolitic script has highly graphic letters that have their own interpretable names, and at the same time they represent numbers, as was the case in some other scripts, such as Hebrew, Greek, and Roman (A is one, B is two, etc.) (Pantić 2002: 135-140). In other words – letters of the Glagolitic script are tripartitely coded which, among other things, gives the possibility of their symbolic interpretation. It is well known, namely, that the symbolic value of letters was not new at the time when Constantine was forming his azbuki. St. Jerome (4th/5th century) and St. Ambrose (4th century) view the alphabet as a system of Christian symbols, St. Isidore of Seville (6th/7th century) speaks of "mystical letters," and St. Paulinus of Nola (4th/5th century) and Saint Theodosius of Alexandria (6th century) see the symbolism of the Holy Trinity in some Greek letters (*alpha* and *phi*) (Žagar according to Samilov 2013: 96). Christian thought thus also speaks from each of Constantine's codes – from each individual letter and from the whole system (Sambunjak 1998: 27-54) shaped as an (azbuki) acrostic prayer and conveying messages that transcend time. One of them (composed of the first nine letters in order) in free translation reads: *I who know the letters (who have come to know God) say that it is (very) good to live on Earth*. This is the case with the Glagolitic script of the oldest Old Slavic monuments (*canonical texts*), which in its round forms preserves the theological-philosophical code of Constantine Cyril, with the one from the 9th century whose proto-forms we assume (the proto-Glagolitic script – the triangular Glagolitic script), which has not been preserved, but also with the younger, angular one, which emerged from its seeds and transformed on Croatian soil.

First three letters of the Glagolitic azbuki – a story of the Christian God

That the Christian message is inscribed in Constantine Cyril's written prayer is firmly (*tvrdo*¹) testified by the very first three letters in the azbuki sequence – *azъ* – a (1), *buky* – b (2), and *vědě / vědi* – v (3) – as symbols of the Triune God – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Some 20th-century theories on the origin of the Glagolitic script also allow us to think in this way: e.g., Finnish Slavist Georg Tschernochvostoff's theory, according to which the Glagolitic script is an author's script based on the stylization (and combinations) of geometric symbols (anchored in Christian interpretations) of the cross, circle, and triangle, and Bulgarian Slavist Vasil Jončev's theory, according to

which each Constantine's letter could be placed in a circle divided into eight equal parts  (Damjanović 2004: 56).

¹*tvrdo* – Old Slavic adverb which means *solid, consistent, reliable, safe* (cf. Damjanović at all. 2004: 269), also the name for the 21st letter in the Glagolitic azbuki order – T (number 300).

Letter AZЪ – □

Constantine Cyril began the azbuki sequence with the sign of the cross □, the central symbol of Christianity, the symbol of the second Divine Person – Jesus Christ. His intention is clear – to mark with the cross not only the symbolic beginning of a sequence – which is (azbuki) prayerful – but also to define the nature, goal, and task of his writing system. In other words, in the very first letter (a) Constantine says this is a Christian missionary script whose task is to Christianize Slavic tribes and bring them into the circle of European Christian nations. The lexical name of the first letter is *azъ*, which translated means *I* (in Old Slavic this is a first-person pronoun), and in its broader meaning *I, a Christian* (created in the image of God), that reflects every (conscious) person joining the community of the baptized. This is the *azъ*, the *I* that merges God-the-Father-like (God defines himself in the Old Testament with the sentence *I am who I am* – God Yahweh), Christlike (the Son of God – the one who is both God and man), and humanlike (we are all sons of God). If we consider Jončev's circular module in which each individual Glagolitic letter is placed, *azъ* is – in the form of the cross – inscribed in a circle, which symbolically testifies to the



unity of God the Son and God the Father, whose eternal nature is represented by a circle ². Furthermore, the numerical value of *aza* is one (1), which also indicates God the Father, the supreme God, and the All-God. It is well known that number one was the signifier and source of all other numbers (monad) in antiquity and the Middle Ages; it is a symbol of the original principle, the elementary cosmic energy, God and his inexhaustible creative power, and such a notion has been accepted by Christianity (Lukić&BlaževićKrezić 2019: 35). The symbolic value of a one in geometry is identified with a circle or a sphere, and in visual arts with circles in general. In the first Glagolitic letter, therefore, the image is the archetype of the unity of God the Father and the Son – the Logos, the second Divine Person, the Incarnate Word – and human / humanity, an unbreakable bond of the spiritual and material worlds – heaven and earth – which the vertical and horizontal arms of the cross, intersecting at the right angle, strive to. This first alphabetical character also turned into a symbol of creation via the first translated sentence from Greek into Old Slavic, the one with which the Gospel of John begins: *IskonibêSlovo... or In the beginning was the Word...* (Bratulić1992: 71).

Letterbuky – □

The second Glagolitic letter □ (b) is called *buky* (in Old Slavic this is a noun of V-change: *buky, bukъve, bukъvi*, cf. Damjanović at all. 2004: 33) and marks *the letter as a sign*, but also a word, read, written text, book (primer), and in the symbolic sense God as the second Divine Person, the Logos, the Incarnate Word, Christ, and also his word – message and testament – the Gospel. Its numerical value is two (2). The symbolism of number two opposes the meaning of number one. Two signifies duality (dyad), a deviation from one, division and bipolarity. Thus, the graphic nature of number two is best witnessed by two circles, the second of which originated from the first (the



monad created the dyad), or the *vesicapiscis* , associated with Christ in Christianity (Lukić&BlaževićKrezić 2019: 37-38). Suffice it to recall that it was the fish that was the secret symbol through which the first Christians recognized each other. The *vesicapiscis* is an utterly abstract representation of the fish that symbolizes Christ according to the fact that the five letters that make up the Greek word *ikhthys* (fish) form a monogram of the initial letters of Greek words which in translation mean: *Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior*. The *vesicapiscis* in every context indicates the creative process of birth and multiplication (mathematical symbol of infinity), and as a symbol of Christ it deepens the relationship between him as God the Son and God the Father he emerges from, just as one circle in the *vesicapiscis* emerges from the other, and the other – emerging – retains the properties of the first. The Glagolitic letter *buky*, first with its numerical value, and then with its graphic nature and name, testifies to the dual nature of the second Divine Person – Christ, man and God, but also to the love that a Christian gives to God and



their neighbors. With its three vertical lines, ³ this letter would reflect the symbolic motivation of the whole God (All-God) in the three divine persons, and the two horizontal ones, which is more important for the realization of symbolic connections with numerical value, would signify the dual nature of Christ (divine and human).

²Letter *azъ* inscribed in Vasil Jončev's project field – a circle divided into eight equal segments from which it is possible to extract each Glagolitic letter of the so-called triangular Glagolitic script / proto-Glagolitic script (according to Horvat 2020: 10).

³Letter *buky* inscribed in Vasil Jončev's project field – a circle divided into eight equal segments from which it is possible to extract each Glagolitic letter of the so-called triangular Glagolitic script / proto-Glagolitic script (according to Horvat 2020: 14).

In a very free interpretation, the letter *buky* could be related to the beginnings – incubation and birth – of the first Slavic literary language and script, which in the 9th century were founded on the fraternal reciprocity of Constantine Cyril and his brother Methodius, the first Slavic bishop, who are also known as the holy brethren. The two of them symbolize an equal, divided, harmonious power that stands at the origin of Slavic literary-linguistic and cultural history – letters / words. Nineteenth-century Croatian poet Petar Preradović calls these two *Slavic evangelizers* THE SLAVIC DIOSCURI (*SLAVENSKI DIOSKURI*) in a poem of the same name on the occasion of the first great Cyril and Methodius anniversary in 1863 (the millennium of the Great Moravian Mission), according to the Greek myth of brothers, inseparable twins, Castor and Pollux. It is not surprising, therefore, that in chapter 7 of *Žitje Metodovo* (The Life of Methodius) from the 12th century, the brethren are yoked, ploughing the same furrow in a common task – one mission (Lukić & Blažević-Krezić 2019: 41). The archetype of the unbreakable bond between God the Father and God the Son is impressed in the second Glagolitic letter as well, with special emphasis on the dual nature of Christ, which he shares with both God and man. This nature also makes him a mediator between Heaven and Earth, which is again clearly and at first seen from the graphic nature of the letter whose axis is the sign of the cross, and a herald, which suggests the meaning of the Old Slavic word *buky*.

Letter *vêdê* / *vêdi* – ◻

The third Glagolitic letter ◻ *vêdê* / *vêdi* (v) has a numerical value three (3), whose graphic equivalent is held to be a triangle. The exceptional and diverse symbolism of number three otherwise provided its geometric representative (triangle) with a position of one of the basic building elements of all Glagolitic letters. The lexical name of this letter comes from the Proto-Slavic verb *vêdêti* (derived from the Proto-Indo-European *weid-) which means to know, to see, to be aware of something (Damjanović at all. 2004: 57) and symbolizes knowledge (cf. ancient Indian holy books, the Vedas). From the graphic perspective, the letter is characterized by two small circles (in angular Glagolitic script, they are transformed into rectangular structures) which occupy the upper half of the circle /



project field according to Jončev .⁴ In Christianity, number three (triad) is associated with the motif of Christ's resurrection on the third day, with the Holy Trinity, and the fertile power of Noah's three sons who restored the human race after the flood. The Holy Trinity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit repeatedly points to a complete, perfect divine nature. It is a matter of the unity of God the Father (the All-God, the supreme God), the second Divine Person (the Logos, Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit. Christian iconography exhausts all prominent meanings in the symbolism of *God's eye* (a triangle with an eye) surrounded by the sun's rays and points to God's omnipresence and omnivisibility, completeness and wholeness described by the Holy Trinity – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In other words, in the spirit of completed knowledge and creation, the triple nature of the Glagolitic letter *vêdê* / *vêdi* (numerical, nominal, and visual) encompasses the symbolism recognized in the (tripartite) codes of the first two letters of the Glagolitic azbuki – letter *azъ* (circle – One – God the Father) and *buky* (the divine and human nature of the second Divine Person, Jesus Christ) (cf. Lukić & Blažević-Krezić 2019: 42-43).

Conclusion

Žitje Konstantinovo (The Life of Constantine) (chapter 14) testifies that St. Cyril composed the script for the Slavs according to divine inspiration, which can be deduced from the following sentence: *Soon God appeared to him, listening to the prayers of his servants, and the Philosopher composed the letters, and began writing the words of the Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, etc."* (Bratulić 1992: 70)

That this is so can be deduced from the very first three letters presented (and there are 38 of them in Constantine's Glagolitic script) – *azъ*, *buky*, and *vêdê* / *vêdi*, which tripartitely coded (as a form, lexical name, and number) tell the story of the Christian Triune God.

References

- Bratulić, J. (translator and annotator) (1992²). *Žitja Konstantina Ćirilai Metodijaidrugavrela*. Zagreb: Kršćanskasadašnjost.
- Damjanović, S. (2004²). *Slovoiskona. Staroslavenska / Starohrvatskačitanka*. Zagreb: Maticahrvatska.
- Damjanović, S., Jurčević, I., Kuštović, T., Kuzmić, B., Lukić, M. & Žagar, M. (2004). *Mali staroslavensko-hrvatskirječnik*. Zagreb: Maticahrvatska.

⁴Letter *vêdê* / *vêdi* inscribed in Vasil Jončev's project field – a circle divided into eight equal segments from which it is possible to extract each Glagolitic letter of the so-called triangular Glagolitic script / proto-Glagolitic script (according to Horvat 2020: 14).

- Horvat, J. (2020). *AZ. Discovering the historical origins of the ancient Croatian alphabet – the Glagolitic script*. Osijek – Zagreb: Andizet – the Institute for Science and Art Research in the Creative Industry & Naklada Ljevak.
- Lukić, M. & Blažević Krezić, V. (2019). *Nova vita glagolitići. Glagoljica iz perspektive znanstvenih, kulturnih i kreativnih praksi*. Osijek – Zagreb: Filozofski fakultet Sveučilišta J. J. Strossmayera u Osijeku & Hrvatska sveučilišna naklada.
- Sambunjak, S. (1998). *Gramatografija Konstantina Filozofa Solunskoga. Hipoteza o postanku i značenju glagoljice*. Zagreb: Demetra – Filološka biblioteka Dimitrija Savića.
- Žagar, M. (2013). *Uvod u glagoljsku paleografiju 1*. Zagreb: Institut za hrvatski jezik i jezikoslovlje.

Online Sources

- Pantić, D. (2002). "Judeohrišćanska gramatika i gramatografija Svetog Ćirila". *Iskustva*, No. 11/12, pp. 135-140, in: <https://www.scribd.com/doc/303540505/Filozofija-i-Jezik-Nau%C4%8Dni-Skup-Povodom-Filozofskog-Dela-Mi%C5%A1e-Kuli%C4%87a-Jezik-Prije-Jezika#download>