

Cyril and Methodius (Methody), Founders of the Slavic Alphabet and Language

The most significant event in the history of the Bulgarian people, occurring in the first half of the ninth century, was the creation of the Slavic alphabet and the subsequent emergence of the first Slavic literature.

The creation of the Slavic alphabet was a historical necessity. In the course of three centuries of existence, the Bulgarian state had made considerable social, economic and political progress; it became a big and powerful state. But it lacked its own national alphabet. To satisfy the cultural and educational needs of the victorious Slavic national element, an alphabet other than that of the Greeks was necessary. In Bulgaria at last such alphabet was needed more particularly because of the introduction of Christianity in the latter part of the ninth century as a state religion (886).

The creation of the Slavic alphabet was the work of the famous Slavic educators and brothers Cyril and Methody. It was during the early part of the ninth century that both of them were born in *Salonica* (*Solun*, modern *Thesaloniki*), the capital of Macedonia. Methody was born in 815 and Cyril (whose secular name was Constantine) around 827. Their father Leo, was a nobleman and Byzantine magistrate.

Although the two brothers belonged to a prominent family, they soon renounced secular honours. Methody, after studying law, was appointed governor of the Macedonian province of Strymon (a Byzantine *thema*, with capital *Serres*, in Bulgarian *Siar*) where the Slavic population predominated; but a few years later he abandoned the post and retired to the monastery of St. Basil on the Olympus.

Cyril studied under the best scholars at the Imperial Court under the reign of Michael III (856-867), specializing in Greek literature, rhetoric, music and dialectics. Because of his thorough education he held, for a time, the office of Secretary to the Patriarchate and Librarian in the Cathedral of St. Sophia.

After a brief retreat to a monastery on the Bosphorus, Cyril accepted a professorship of philosophy at the famous University of Constantinople. It was for this reason that Cyril had also the surname of "Philosopher". Soon he entered the priesthood and joined Methody in his monastery. In their missionary work Cyril was the philosopher, while Methody was noted for his administrative ability. Both of them spoke the old Slavonic language fluently.

At this time, Cyril had heard that the Slavs could not understand the divine service and the Bible. He set himself therefore, to compose an alphabet to meet all the requirements of the Slavic (or "*Glagolic*") speech with its many sounds. The two brothers set themselves to inventing the necessary alphabet by taking letters from the Greek, Coptic and Armenian alphabets. Scholars of the Old Slavic alphabet consider Cyril as the author of the more difficult *Glagolitza* script (862), contending that the Cyrillic alphabet was invented by his disciple *St. Clement of Ochrid* some decades later. The *glagolitza* (in Old Slavic *glagol* means *word*, hence a sign that speaks) was more or less similar to the alphabets of the Near East. It is still used in liturgical services in some part of Croatia and Dalmatia.

The Cyrillic alphabet derives from the Greek uncials of the ninth century to which were added other letters (signs) that expressed Slavic sounds for which there was no equivalent in Greek. This less complicated alphabet has been and still is used by Bulgarians, Serbs, Ukrainians, Russians and some other peoples in their literary and liturgical books.

Although Cyril and Methody spoke the then Slavic language fluently, their work of converting the pagan Slav mass could not be effective without the translation of the Gospel and liturgical books into the native tongue. Having made his alphabet, Cyril in cooperation with his brother, began the translation of the Scriptures and the necessary liturgical books. These works were spread not only in Bulgaria but also throughout the Slavic world.

When Photios was elevated to Patriarch in 860, both brothers were invited to become active in the life of the Church. A people known as the Khazars had settled in Crimea and around the Black Sea in (what is now) Southern Russia. In 860 the Khazars had petitioned Constantinople to send them Christian missionaries and the first to be sent there (861) were Cyril and Methody. With the help of the newly invented alphabet they succeeded to Christianize part of the Khazars, their Khan (ruling Prince) among the converts.

Immediately after the Khazar mission, a delegation arrived, in 862, in Constantinople from Moravia (now part of the Czech Republic). Rostislav, the ruler of Moravia-Bohemia, having established an independent kingdom, known as the "Great Moravian Empire", had driven out the German influence and asked for Christian teachers and missionaries who could preach to his people and conduct the divine service in their Slavonic language.

Cyril and Methody were again selected for this service. Once in Moravia, they began translating the scriptures and liturgical books from the Greek. This activity aroused the German clergy of the neighbouring states. They were opposed not so much to the Byzantine rite as to the popular vernacular speech being used as a medium of worship. The German clergy were stressing that only Latin, Hebrew and Greek could be used in celebrating the mass, since these languages have been represented in the inscription on Christ's cross. Wearing continued complaints against the Salonica brothers, the Pope (Adrian II) interrupted their three-year-old mission by summoning them to Rome. Convinced by Cyril's arguments that the Slavic language used in liturgy is the best means of conveying Christianity to the Moravian pagans, the Pope sealed his confidence in them by blessing their translation of the Scriptures and by celebrating mass over them. While in Rome, Cyril and Methody were both consecrated as Bishops. Amid the honours lavished upon them, Cyril fell ill and in February 869, passed away at the age of 42. Cyril was buried in the lower basilica of S. Clement's church in Rome.

After his brother's death, Methody returned to Moravia to continue his missionary work despite the enormous opposition against him. Pope Adrian II had created for Methody the Archbishopric of Sirmium (capital of Lower Pannonia, today Sremska Mitrovica in Serbia). The historical role of Sirmium increased in the 9th century, when it was part of [Bulgarian Empire](#). Pope Adrian II gave [St. Methodius](#) the title of Archbishop of Sirmium. After having adopted Christianity, the Bulgarians restored in Sirmium the Christian Episcopate, having in mind old Christian traditions and the reputation this city

had in the ancient world. But Methody's mission had constantly been hampered by the bitter attacks of the German bishops of Salzburg and Passau who regarded his Archbishopric as cutting into their dioceses. Enlisting the help of King Ludwig of Bavaria, the German bishops succeeded in 871, to force Methody to leave his archbishopric. Returning to Constantinople in 882, he undertook completing translation of the Bible. Exhausted physically after 22 years of missionary work among the Slavs, he died in 885 at the age of 60.

In spite of their failure to make Slavic prevail in the field of their mission, Cyril and Methody nonetheless hastened the process of Christianization among all the Slavs, and by translating the Gospel and other central Church books and writing, they gave rise to the Slavic literature.

By Christo Anastasoff, published in *Balkania*, April 1967