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Origin of the Glagolitic Letter for 'R'; It Looks Like Greek rho (ρ), But Why Is It Upside Down?

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pertain to Slavic and are here removed.]

ORIGIN OF THE GLAGOLITIC LETTER FOR ‘R’; IT LOOKS LIKE GREEK *RHO* (ρ), BUT WHY IS IT UPSIDE-DOWN?

Gerald Cohen

The Glagolitic letter for ‘R’ () looks like the Greek letter *rho* (ρ) but upside down. Schenker 1995, evidently reflecting the *communis opinio* of scholars says of the Glagolitic letter: ‘Possibly Greek *rho*.’ That does seem obvious, but why did Cyril put it upside-down? Perhaps this was arbitrary, but perhaps not.

Cyril and his brother Methodius, were Christian missionaries, and the appearance of at least some Christian symbolism in their creative work (the alphabet) would not be surprising. Indeed, it would be surprising if none appeared.

The Trinity seems well represented (letters with three straight strokes, e.g. a triangle – representing ‘three’ and frequent presentations of a circle – each of which represents unity. Of particular interest (mentioned ca. 1964 in a Slavic linguistics class taught by George Shevelov, although I do not remember who he said suggested it), the striking similarity of the two Glagolitic letters  ‘I’ and  ‘S’ is explainable by their being the first two letters of ‘Isus’ (Jesus). To this I would add that these two letters (each one with a circle and triangle) both seem to proclaim the Trinity.

Also, Schenker 1995 comments that the first letter of the alphabet (), may represent a cross. Incidentally, too, its name is ‘az’ (meaning: I); in a profoundly Christian work this would seem most appropriate if the speaker is understood to be Jesus. Perhaps Cyril had in mind a passage like John 14:6:

5 “‘Lord,” said Thomas, “we do not know where You are going, so how can we know the way?”

6 Jesus answered, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.’

Now, if we assume that at least some Christian symbolism would likely appear in the work of a Christian missionary, an interpretation may emerge for the upside down *rho*. One of the most profound expressions of commitment to Christianity came from St. Peter, who when condemned to death in Rome requested to be crucified upside down, because he did not consider himself worthy to be killed in the same manner as Jesus Christ.

The Greek letter *rho* is derived from the Phoenician letter for 'R', which was originally the picture of a head. The circular part of Greek *rho* represents the head itself, and the straight line is the neck. The word for 'head' in Hebrew is 'rosh,' as was probably also the Phoenician word. The name of the Hebrew letter is 'resh'; Cyril, who knew Hebrew, would have known this and almost certainly made the connection of the letter with 'head.'

So the upside down *rho* might symbolize St. Peter's upside down crucifixion, with its profound conveyance of devotion to Jesus Christ.

See below, p. 4, for Michelangelo's painting of the scene.



The Internet website that presents the painting adds:

Image: canvasreplicas.com

The Crucifixion of St. Peter is a fresco painting by the Italian Renaissance master Michelangelo Buonarroti (c. 1546-1550). It is housed in the Cappella Paolina.

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