

FLIPPING THE SCRIPT:

Multiscript Possibilities of Glagolitic Revival for Ukrainian Typography and Beyond

The Glagolitic Script, arguably the earliest full-fledged graphic system developed for the transcription of Slavic languages, was designed in the 9th century by Cyril, a Byzantine priest, proselytizing throughout Central and Eastern Europe. The lack of Zoom, Slack, or Discord at Cyril's disposal necessitated an original means of delivering the Greek Holy Scripture to the pagan Slavs. The true marketing specialist of his time, Cyril devised a graphic system to transcribe Christian codices into a range of still mutually intelligible Slavic languages, now referred to as the Glagolitic script.



Contemporary rendition of the Glagolitic letters Ѡ, Ѣ, Ѥ, Ѧ.

The original script developed by Cyril's 'design agency' was largely abandoned soon after its creation. Deemed arcane and paganistic, it was overtaken by the Cyrillic script (confusingly not authored by Cyril himself), which borrowed numerous letterforms and their phonetic values from the Greek alphabet, pulling the emerging Slavic principalities into the Byzantine cultural sphere.

If we indeed consider Cyril the designer of these early letterforms, we could call the alphabet development his freelance project—the Glagolitic script (final.id) was the designer's original idea, whereas the Cyrillic script (final_final_usethis111.id) was its revised version, heavily influenced by the client's (in this case, the clergy and state) corrections, undermining the initial concept for the sake of marketability and politics.



Comparison of Glagolitic (no background), Cyrillic (white background), and Greek (black background) letterforms

The Glagolitic script was the Helvetica of the 10th-century Slavic writing, widely used throughout Central and Eastern Europe. The graphic system developed several styles reflecting its popularity and compatibility with various materials and tools. It was in use the longest on the terrains of modern-day Croatia where it survived up until the 19th century. Even today, one can find sporadic Glagolitic inscriptions on souvenirs and state institutions there. Despite its seeming disuse, the script is compatible with digital devices and is supported by Unicode, making it easily accessible and displayable on screen.

Centuries went by, and, while the Glagolitic inscriptions became scarce, the Cyrillic script kept evolving, maturing into the Ukrainian alphabet we know today. The 33 letters of the Abetka (ukr. alphabet) have encoded the core of Ukrainian identity through liturgical chants, lyrical poetry, and revolutionary mottos. Acknowledging the importance of text in the development of a cultural paradigm, one cannot ignore the historical precedents of parallel digraphia. Although Cyril's early experiments did not withstand the edits of history, the design process behind the Glagolitic letterforms remains an integral stage in the development of the Slavic, and, thus, Ukrainian writing.

Complex graphic systems are not elusive Fata Morgana at the typographic periphery but functioning modalities of natural languages. The Japanese writing, which formed at the same time as Glagolitic and Cyrillic, is a textbook example of a multiscript system. Synchronously utilizing three modes of transcription—hiragana (the backbone of Japanese writing used to transcribe grammatical particles and endings), katakana (employed to write down loanwords, animals and plants), and kanji (adapted Chinese characters)—the triune augments the language's graphic plasticity and encourages visual and semiotic experiments.

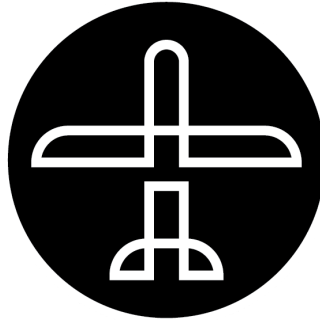
The emulsification of the two Japanese syllabaries—katakana and hiragana—which contain sets of glyphs that are identical phonetically but differ graphically, can serve as a starting point for identifying the potential role of the Glagolitic script in modern Ukrainian. Despite its primary role as a transcriber of foreign vocabulary, katakana, the evil twin of hiragana, is also often used for emphasis, gaining particular popularity on signs and in advertisements.



Comparison of Glagolitic and Cyrillic glyphs for sound [ts] and Hiragana and Katakana versions of [na]

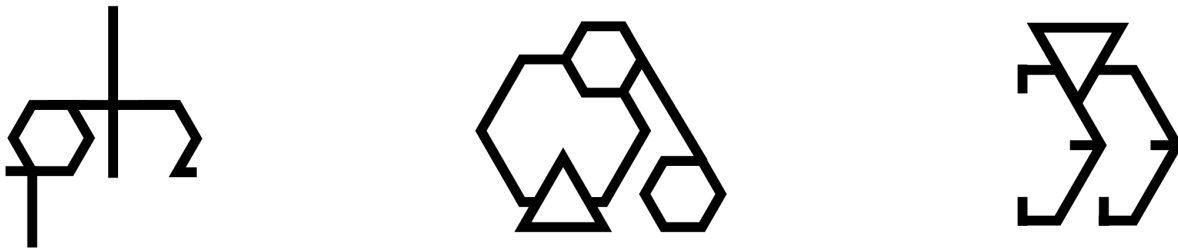
If one substitutes katakana and hiragana in this equation with the Glagolitic and Cyrillic scripts respectively, the area of the multiscript practical application begins materializing. Graphic design and marketing are the primary beneficiaries of the incorporation of an auxiliary graphic system, naturally suited for generation of icons and logos. For instance, in Ukrainian the words describing the process of flying (ukr. *летіти, летовище, прилетити*), including the word for plane (ukr. *літак*) share a root consonant [l]. Studying the Glagolitic letter for the sound [l]—*л*—reveals that it can be easily manipulated into a graphic representation of a plane or an up-facing arrow with potential use in airport or airline branding and

signage. Additionally, the Glagolitic script features an opulent set of ligatures facilitating letter morphing for logos and stylized calligraphy. It was a common practice in Glagolitic typesetting to slice letters in halves and fuse them together, generating hundreds of unique glyphs. The script's flexibility elucidates the prospects of its use in developing a distinct visual identity.



Two Galogilic letters **ѿѿ** forming an icon of a plane

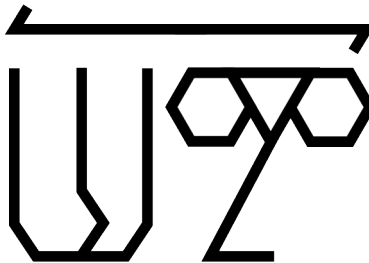
The script's emphatic character allows for its application even in more conservative body-text typesetting. Studying Glagolitic typographic anatomy, one will quickly identify its peculiar characteristic—abundance of bowls (a typographic lingo for a circular enclosure such as in letters o or d). The Ukrainian Cyrillic type tends to lack expressivity, due to the rare occurrence of ascenders or descenders compared to the Latin script, which makes its typesetting rather monotonous. Due to the contrasting structure, Glagolitic glyphs might serve as buoys, floating amid the waves of Cyrillic typesetting, allowing for the text's visual synco-pation as well as facilitating page navigation.



Contemporary rendition of the Galogilic ligatures **ѿѿ**, **ѿѿ**, **ѿѿѿ**

If one atomizes the contents of the Ukrainian Cyrillic, it will become apparent that the seemingly monolithic system is far from being homogenous. Numbers, a ubiquitous element of modern writing, are, in fact, a long-forgotten and widely accepted borrowing. Currently, Ukrainian utilizes two distinct sets of numbers following a larger European paradigm—Arabic numerals are employed for transcription of quantities, prices, coordinates etc. while Roman numerals denote centuries and titles. The Glagolitic script, similar to other graphic systems, including historical Armenian and Greek, is capable of denoting numbers using letters. For instance, the first Glagolitic letter **ѿ** also denotes number 1, the next letter **ѿ**, means 2, following **ѿѿ**—3 and so on. Such a system is evidently not well-suited for the transcription of modern mathematics. However, it might come in handy while dealing with ordinal numbers. The numer-

als transcribed with Glagolitic letterforms are indirectly assigned a phonetic component, which serves as a mnemonic rule, facilitating number memorization. For instance, the year 2010 would be written as ШѢ, corresponding to the phonetic value of *sh-i*. In the guise of ordinal numbers, the Glagolitic numerals may also appear on plaques indicating the building's number. Due to high recognizability, they resist blending with the rest of urban typography, facilitating urban navigation.



Numerals are marked with a special diacritic called titlo to differentiate them from letters

While historically, Cyrillic is also capable of such conversion, the Glagolitic numbering system is more logical. Modeled closely after the Greek system, the Cyrillic numbers do not align with the order of the alphabet, causing odd disruptions. For instance, the second letter no longer represents the numeral 2, and the numeral 9 is represented by the letter that is positioned second-to-last in the alphabet. The Glagolitic numbers can, therefore, substitute the Roman numerals for ordinal number transcription, which do not facilitate memorization and blend in with text set in Cyrillic due to the similarity in their glyph anatomy.

The introduction of a secondary script, besides supplying an additional typographic or orthographic nuance, will also result in the socio-linguistic delineation of its usage. Even if never popularized in everyday life, the Glagolitic script can find a wide range of application in literature, particularly graphic novels and comics.

Reflecting on the practical applications of katakana, which I have previously likened with the potential role of the Glagolitic script, one might notice its particular abundance in manga. Katakana does play an emphatic role in Japanese comics, but also serves as an indicator of an alien or robotic speech. Assigning different speech transcription to specific characters results in a more immersive and nuanced reading experience.

While the original roles of the Glagolitic and Cyrillic scripts were similar - transcription of religious texts - Cyrillic evolved into a universal neutral script, deprived of nuanced socio-linguistic profile. The Glagolitic script, on the other hand, is associated primarily with the distant past, and secondary with liturgical texts. Therefore, it would be appropriate to utilize the script in transcription of antiquated or priestly speech, to highlight the solemnity or abstruseness of an utterance. Glagolitic script is, in fact, used by The Witcher franchise as a world-building tool, corroborating the script's artistic potential.

These are just the first results of the research into the Glagolitic revival. It indeed can boost the creative

possibilities in the fields of graphic design, urban design, and experimental literature. However, the crucial outcome is recognizing writing as a set of pliant conventions, galvanizing the experimentation around speech transcription.

In today's postmodern world, where texts matter over anything (if anything besides texts even exists), theorizing multiscript systems encourages foregoing graphic monism by supplying an additional shell a word can occupy. Such a graphic quantum state undermines the hegemony of the word's imposed singular meaning, revealing the interactive and personalized aspects of language. Context-specific association of form and content achieved by diversifying writing helps avoid word banalization, rendering the world an endless scroll of poetry.

misha poklad for Slanted

