Introduction

This book is about the origins and early uses of writing in a particular society (Rus), but it may also serve as a case-study for those with a broader interest either in medieval uses of writing or – still more broadly – in the cultural history of information technology. The book has two main aims, one informative, the other interpretative. The first aim (the focus of Part I) is to introduce the evidence, the primary material, the full range of different types of writing, from scratches on spindle whorls to luxury parchment manuscripts. The second aim (the focus of Part II) is to consider aspects of the social and cultural dynamics of writing: its functions, its status, its 'meanings', its relationship to processes of social and cultural change. In pursuit of the two aims I pose three questions: what were the characteristic features of the period as a whole? how did they emerge or change over time? and to what extent were they similar or dissimilar to equivalent phenomena elsewhere? In other words, the treatment combines elements of the synchronic, the diachronic and the comparative.

Any beginning or end is to some extent arbitrary. I start in the middle of the tenth century because that, very roughly, is the time of the earliest extant evidence for native uses of writing. It also coincides, very roughly indeed, with the first phase of the emergence of the 'land of the Rus' as a coherent entity with some degree of political, geographical and linguistic definition.[1] Closure is more problematic. I stop at the end of the thirteenth century. The Mongol invasions of 1237–1240 might provide a conventional pretext for closure, but they do not mark an immediate social or cultural break. For present purposes, more relevant than the Mongol invasions in themselves are, in the north and east, the rise of Moscow and, in the west and south, the incursions by Lithuania. Though I shall occasionally refer to 'Pre-Mongol' Rus, the period covered by this book

[1] I provide a map and the occasional explanatory excursus, but no general narrative of background 'events'. Readers may find it useful to refer to, e.g. Janet Martin, *Medieval Russia, 980–1584* (Cambridge, 1995); also Simon Franklin and Jonathan Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus 750–1200* (London, 1996).

might better be termed 'Pre-Muscovite', or 'Pre-Lithuanian'. Thus we arrive at *circa* 950–*circa* 1300, with emphasis on the *circa* at both ends.

At the risk of labouring what may be obvious, it would be as well to outline in advance some of the main elements of my approach to the theme of writing in cultural history: first, in general; then, in relation to Rus.

In the very broadest definition, *any* graphic sign or set of signs can be labelled 'writing'. All visual representation is a form of 'text', which can be 'read'. Writing is a form of depiction; or, more simply, depiction is writing. Indeed, some languages (including, for the present context, Greek and Church Slavonic) use the same word for 'to write' as for 'to depict'. More narrowly, writing is a system of graphic signs, the primary use of which, in combination with one another, is to indicate the sound-, word- or thought-sequences of language. 'Thought-writing' (pictograms, ideograms) is not necessarily tied to a specific language; hence identical signs – such as mathematical symbols, or road signs, or manufacturers' logos, or Chinese characters – can 'mean' roughly the same thing, yet are decoded through entirely different sets of sounds. 'Sound-writing' (syllabic, consonantal or alphabetic script) is a system of graphic signs which, when combined, are designed to be decoded as specified words of a particular language.[2] In the present book 'writing' for the most part implies alphabetic script. In principle, alphabetic script is generally understood to represent graphically the sounds of speech. In practice, the functions of real alphabets in real use are not so straightforward, either in relation to the sounds of speech or in relation to other graphic devices.

On the one hand, even in their main function as signifiers of utterances through their constituent sounds, alphabets depend on cultural collusion among their users more than on the transparent 'logic' implied in the alphabetic principle. Except in the early stages of learning, the act of reading – the act of decoding the graphic sign – tends to be by word-recognition rather than by the sequential reconstitution of sounds. Modern reading is mostly silent, so that the 'sound' is in any case notional. The same alphabet can be used in different languages, such that the same graphic signs (letters) are decoded as different sounds. Within a language, alphabets tend to be normative and conservative, taking little

[2] Here I fall into the 'scriptist' heresy excoriated by Roy Harris, *The Origin of Writing* (London, 1986), pp. 29–56, although Harris's theory of writing, which stresses its nature as graphic sign, is a stimulating corrective to complacent identification between writing and language: see his later book, *Signs of Language* (London, 1996). For the convenient distinction between 'thought-writing' and 'sound-writing' see Albertine Gaur, *A History of Writing*, revised edn (London, 1992), pp. 14–15.

account of variation in speech-sounds over time or region (nor do we fully abolish the problem by speaking of 'phonemes' instead of 'sounds'). In other words, real alphabetic writing should not be confused with phonetic transcription, its more pliant derivative.

On the other hand, what alphabetic writing 'says' is not always directly retrievable as speech. Though the basic job of an alphabet is to serve as a form of notation for words, those who use alphabetic script are also free to exploit other dimensions of its semantic potential as a graphic medium. A piece of writing is a made object, with visual and perhaps even tangible properties. Variables in the way writing is presented – in its materials, or its design, size, context, colours or techniques – can be used to convey non-verbal messages: messages about status and authority, for example, or about wealth, or taste. In some situations the non-linguistic (or non-glottal) messages even constitute the main 'text' to be read, more important than the bare words. Although alphabetic script does have its own distinct functions, it can also share the semantic functions of other graphic devices, and on this non-linguistic level the boundary between writing in the narrow sense and writing in the broad sense (where any depiction is a 'text') is far from clear. For example, the ability to 'sign' one's name is commonly taken as a measure of the ability to write alphabetic script; yet the point of a modern 'signature' is not to convey a word through correct spelling (modern signatures are often strictly indecipherable as alphabetic script), but to form a unique and identifiable shape, a personal graphic 'sign', to function as an ideogram. The writing of meaning is only a part of the meaning of writing. In this respect, alphabetic writing should be seen as only a part of what might be called the total *graphic environment*. I shall be concerned not only with who wrote or read what kinds of articulated words, but also with the semantic implications of writing in the wider graphic environment.

Writing is a technique, as is reading. Those who acquire the technical skills tend to be labelled 'literate', and the study of the uses of reading and writing is generally associated with the study of *literacy*. With reference to individuals, 'literacy' has two meanings, one technical, the other cultural. In the technical sense it implies some level of ability in reading and/or writing. In the cultural sense it implies some level of familiarity with, and mastery of, cultural activities in which reading and writing are used. In both cases the criteria for what constitutes literacy, in an individual, vary from society to society, and there is no point in setting a universal standard. Nowadays, in order to be functionally literate, an individual needs to be able to perform quite complex tasks fluently. At other times, for technical literacy, it may have been sufficient to be able to write one's name or to struggle through a document with guidance. The two skills

can even be separated. Just as it is possible to read a language without being able to speak it, so it is possible to write without being able to read (i.e. merely to reproduce letter-forms from an exemplar, such as when a monoglot typesetter sets a text in foreign script) or to read without being able to write. What matters is what matters in context, what one needs to be literate *for*. With reference to the individual, the notional opposite of 'literacy' is 'illiteracy'. The opposition is notional, because the boundary is socially constructed. A person considered literate in one society may be considered illiterate in another; or, more confusingly, a person obviously literate in the technical sense may nevertheless be branded – or confess to being – illiterate in the cultural sense. In this book I try to avoid any general measure of individual literacy, reserving the word instead for the technical skills required in specific contexts, or for occasions when the term is specifically justified by an equivalent expression in the sources.[3]

In cultural history 'literacy' has acquired a third meaning: it denotes the sum of social and cultural phenomena associated with the uses of writing (here the notional opposite of 'literacy' is 'orality').[4] 'Literacy studies', in this sense, flourish. However, if one accepts this use of the term, one must be wary of implicit contamination with the technical meanings of the word with regard to individuals. In industrial or post-industrial societies it is reasonable to link the study of the uses of writing with the study of the individual technical skills, since mastery of the technical skills is a prerequisite for any form of significant involvement in the uses of writing. Not so in a pre-industrial age, or for a different type of cultural 'literacy'.[5] Of course it is interesting, and relevant, to know who could read and/or write, and to what level and for what purposes, but an individual or social literacy-index is not at all the same thing as a survey of those who were, to varying degrees and in various ways, involved in the *culture of the written word*. Participation in, or access to, the culture of the written word was far from being the exclusive preserve of technically literate people. The written word reaches and may affect anybody who can listen to it being read (or even recited from third-hand memory), or anybody who sees written objects in their graphic environment. The culture of the written word may

[3] See e.g. below, pp. 223–4, on the *knizhnik* (bookman, man of letters, *litteratus*).
[4] Compare the sharply contrastive approach of Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word* (London, 1982), with the more nuanced essays in David R. Olson and Nancy Torrance (eds.), *Literacy and Orality* (Cambridge, 1991).
[5] See esp. Michael Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307* (London, 1979); Franz H. Baüml, 'Varieties and Consequences of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy', *Speculum* 55 (1980), 237–65; D. H. Green, 'Orality and Reading: The State of Research in Medieval Studies', *Speculum* 65 (1990), 267–80; Charles F. Briggs, 'Literacy, Reading and Writing in the Medieval West', *Journal of Medieval History* 26 (2000), 397–420.

even be partly shaped by people who do not themselves apply the technical skills: 'writers' need not write, if they can dictate, and texts are produced by those who commission them as much as by those who copy them out. 'To read' may mean 'to hear', and 'to write' may mean 'to cause to be written'. No points are being stretched here. Nowadays 'to build' can mean 'to cause to be built', as in 'we built an extension to our house last year'. Or, perhaps a closer analogy: computer culture is a far larger and more complex phenomenon than the culture of computer programmers. This book is about the culture of the written word, of which individual, technical literacy is a necessary component, but not necessarily a major component, and certainly not the only component.

Writing is also a technology. The invention of writing, and its acquisition in successive societies, is one of the great leaps in *information technology*, along with the emergence of speech itself, the invention of printing and the development of electronic media (hence such metaphorical usages as 'computer literacy').[6] In a period of unprecedentedly rapid global change in information technology, the historical study of the uses of writing can become an oblique form of self-exploration: what are the implications of technological change? How profound or predictable or controllable are its consequences in which areas of social and personal life? This is a fertile environment for interdisciplinary and cross-cultural study, where the theoretical and the practical, the past and the present, the remote and the immediate, mingle to mutual advantage. The study of the sociocultural ramifications of writing fits into no single academic niche. It is nobody's property. Insights derived from case-studies of ancient Mesopotamia, or of classical Greece, or of medieval England, or of twentieth-century West Africa, are exchanged in productive dialogue across chronological, geographical, institutional and disciplinary boundaries.

Writing is a technology which turns words into objects. It gives them form, or signifies them by means of form. It makes words visible, tangible, portable. It separates speech from speaker, message from messenger, known from knower. It resituates the word in time and space. It enables words to be preserved, verified and copied, rearranged and revised, contemplated and analysed at leisure. Such, in principle, are some of its properties. The contentious issue is how, in general and in particular cases, the properties of the technology relate to social and cultural change. Answers can be arranged on a scale running from an extreme

[6] For an overview see e.g. Michael E. Hobart and Zachary S. Schiffman, *Information Ages. Literacy, Numeracy, and the Computer Revolution* (Baltimore and London, 1998), although here the authors argue that 'information' as such is first made possible through writing, not through speech alone: see *ibid.*, pp. 27–30.

'technocentric' approach at one end to an extreme 'anthropocentric' approach at the other.

According to the 'technocentric' approach, technology causes change, and the spread of writing has profound *consequences* both for individuals and for societies. In the individual the acquisition of the technical skills changes not only the scope of activities and social opportunities but also structures and habits of thought. Since writing can be preserved and perused, its messages can be analysed and criticised. Writing engenders habits of abstract argument, formal logic, critical thought. In society the ability to make and keep written records of transactions encourages the emergence of new institutions, new forms of social control. Written procedures allow the standardisation of administrative norms across vast areas. Record-keeping swells the power of the record-keeper, or the record-validator. The spread of writing enables – hastens, even causes – the growth of centralised bureaucracies. And then there is 'culture': religion, ideology, literature. Writing enables the dissemination of authoritative texts which cut across social, communal and geographic divisions. It allows the words of authority to extend beyond their immediate audience. It creates, in effect, new communities, 'textual' communities,[7] those who share a written language, or who acknowledge the authority of a particular body of writings. In all these capacities writing not merely enables its users to perform certain tasks more effectively; it alters the very nature of the tasks which they are able to perform, and it alters their perception of such tasks. Writing changes the world. When fully exploited, the technology of writing, whether it functions as a means of information storage or as a means of expression or as a means of communication, fundamentally affects the way societies are organised, the hierarchies of power, the criteria of authority, the forms of cultural activity, the structures of thought,[8] even the very workings of the human brain.[9]

The grand technocentric vision has opened broad avenues of speculation and inquiry, but in its pure form (which, to be fair, few of its

[7] A term usefully developed by Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Modes of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton, 1983).

[8] See, especially, the influential 'trilogy' by Jack Goody: *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge, 1977); *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (Cambridge, 1986), and *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge, 1987).

[9] Leonard Schlain, *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess: the Conflict Between Word and Image* (London, 1999) has argued with considerable verve that writing brings about the dominance of 'left-brain' capabilities over 'right-brain' capabilities, and hence leads to the triumph of militant rationalism and the destruction of matriarchy; cf. Richard Hellie, 'Late Medieval and Early Modern Russian Civilization and Modern Neuroscience', in A. M. Kleimola and G. D. Lenhoff (eds.), *Culture and Identity in Muscovy, 1359–1584* (UCLA Slavic Studies, New Series, vol. III; Moscow, 1997), pp. 146–65, who speculates that traditional low levels of literacy were responsible for Muscovy being a 'right-brained civilization'.

proponents would advocate) it is easier to knock than to defend.[10] Above all, a normative scheme of technologically determined cultural evolution stumbles against the diversity of actual case-studies. If technology is the cause, why do not all societies show the same effects? Writing has existed for millennia, most societies have had opportunities to acquire and exploit the technology, but why have not all of them produced Greek philosophers, Hebrew scribes, Arab calligraphers, Roman lawyers, or Soviet bureaucrats? Demonstrably, 'the mere availability of writing does not transform a society'.[11] The anthropocentric response is to assert that the agent of change is not the technology but the user: people, society. People choose, or do not choose, to adopt writing or to explore its potential according to their perception of their own needs. There is resistance to writing in those societies, or in those activities within a society, which are perceived to function adequately without it. Writing is accepted or rejected, expanded or contracted, according to need. If it ain't broke, don't fix it. Societies do not change because they introduce writing; they introduce writing because they change.

The anthropocentric riposte sounds eminently reasonable, but this plain reversal of causation is no less crude; as if 'needs' are consistently identified independently of the means available to meet them. People may indeed exploit writing according to their needs, but people's perception of their needs can be affected by their experience of writing. Writing is not literally an agent, and it does not bring inevitable consequences, but through the use of writing and through reflecting on writing, people can develop habits of thought and behaviour which they would not otherwise have suspected in themselves; they can develop new needs. There is an interaction, a dynamic relationship. The contrastive approaches can be recast as an inclusive approach: societies exploit writing because they change, *and* societies change because they exploit writing. We may well distrust technological determinism and prefer human agency, but we can still accept, if not that the technology changes people, then at least that people's own experience of the technology can induce them (individually and collectively, as societies) to change themselves.

The uses of writing must therefore be considered not just in themselves, but in their dynamic relationship with, on the one hand, the *non*-uses of writing and, on the other hand, social perceptions of what writing is, of its nature, status, authority and functions.

[10] See, for example, the critiques by Carol Fleischer Feldman, 'Oral Metalanguage', in Olson and Torrance, *Literacy and Orality*, pp. 47–65; and J. Peter Denny, 'Rational Thought and Literate Decontextualization', *ibid.*, pp. 66–89.
[11] Gaur, *A History of Writing*, p. 15.

Writing and non-writing, the sphere of the written and the sphere of the spoken ('literacy' and 'orality') have often been presented as polar opposites, or – in the technocentric scheme – as ideally distinct stages in sociocultural evolution.[12] This is misleading. The written mode and the spoken mode are neither discrete stages on an evolutionary journey nor entirely interchangeable options at any given time. The notion of a distinct 'orality' is properly tenable only with regard to societies where writing is wholly unknown. Otherwise the culture of the written word and the culture of the spoken word overlap, interact, modify and modulate each other. Writing does not obliterate speech and memory, but rather the functions of each are affected by the presence of the other. The ways in which they do so are not simply predictable, but are specific to the sociocultural dynamics of a given society. To risk some analogies: contrary to prediction, computerisation has not led to mass bankruptcies among paper manufacturers, though the functions and status of print-copy are affected (in some areas reduced, in other areas enhanced) by the existence of electronic storage. Contrary to some predictions (and to early trends), television and video have not rendered cinemas redundant; instead cinemas have adapted in response to television and video, and film-production has adapted to explore the differential qualities of the large and the small screen, of public and domestic display. Contrary to what might seem practical logic, telephone and e-mail have not led to a decline in academic and business travel. Words delivered in a face-to-face meeting, by telephone, by e-mail, in a hand-written letter, or in a computer-generated letter may carry an identical verbal meaning, but the choice of modes may convey different cultural messages. In none of these cases should one speak of either 'residual' survivals of the older technology or of straightforward alternatives. In all cases the functions of one mode are adapted through the presence of the other. The uses of writing have a bearing on the cultural semantics of non-writing, and vice versa.[13]

Writing is a cultural phenomenon. Its meanings are not implicit. As a set of signs, it has the significance and functions ascribed to it by those who use it or who come into contact with it. Its *status and authority* (and hence its non-verbal meaning) reflect cultural values. The value attributed to writing is rarely constant in all its contexts, and it is rarely appropriate to speak of 'the' status of writing throughout a given society. On the contrary, the sociocultural dynamics of writing in a society may be characterised by the patterns of variation in the status and authority of types

[12] Hence, for example, the persistent retention of oral methods, where writing is available, can be classified as merely 'residual': see Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, pp. 99, 109, 115–16.
[13] See the 'ecological' metaphor applied by David Barton, *Literacy. An Introduction to the Ecology of the Written Word* (Oxford, 1994).

of writing within that society. Variables include the social or occupational status of the producers of writing (author, scribe, editor, individual or institutional patron), the verbal contents, the social or transactional context, the consumer (individual reader, recipient, communal addressee), as well as the forms of presentation of the medium itself. In their fluctuating combinations, such variables produce quite complex patterns of differentiation within and between the linked communities of a given society. Before seeking a unifying theory, or perhaps instead of seeking a unifying theory, one needs to map the patterns of differentiation which, taken together, characterise the culture (or cultures) of the written word in Rus.

Such patterns are not rigidly predictable, and to that extent the adoption and spread of writing does not have a fixed set of consequences, or even of implications. But neither are the patterns completely random. Although few if any societies reproduce the totality of each other's uses and perceptions of writing precisely in every detail, few if any societies develop features in their uses and perceptions of writing which are wholly unparalleled elsewhere. Hence, however fragile any unified theory, the cultural history of writing remains a unified field of study in which each case history has a bearing on our understanding of the field as a whole.

Writing in Rus has, naturally, been of interest to historians for as long as written sources have been studied, and the first object of study is the sources themselves. Until about the middle of the twentieth century the study of early Rus writing meant, almost exclusively, the study of books. The scholar toiled in libraries and archives, scrutinising ancient parchment folia, classifying variants in the forms of text, language or letter, hypothesising about lost prototypes, and scouring native and foreign narratives for allusions which might shed light on periods for which little or no authentic material had survived. Since the middle of the twentieth century the front line of investigation has shifted from the library into the field, from dusty-fingered palaeographer to muddy-booted archaeologist. Thanks to the successes of archaeology, the quantity and range of available written sources grow year by year, and the picture of early Rus written culture has changed dramatically. The most significant revisions relate to three issues in particular: (i) the origins of writing; (ii) the language of writing; and (iii) the social distribution of writing. And in all three cases the call for revision derives from the same underlying change in the scope of the available evidence: the discovery of large quantities of written objects produced by and for members of the lay urban community, and the consequent reconsideration of the role of the Church.

When almost all known or analysed specimens of writing were parchment manuscripts emanating from a predominantly ecclesiastical milieu, the general contours of the adoption and spread of the technology seemed clear; or seemed clear to those who took a prudent view of the evidence. Towards the end of the tenth century (the traditional, emblematic date is 988) Prince Vladimir Sviatoslavich of Kiev made Christianity the 'official' faith of his people. The Church brought the technology of writing, and an established language of writing (Church Slavonic), and it trained personnel (the clergy, monks) in the uses of writing. Scraps of non-ecclesiastical writing were too rare and enigmatic to have a major impact on the overall scheme. Word-forms and spellings that failed to adhere to Church Slavonic norms could be dismissed as mistakes or as evidence of an occasional, limited semi-literacy among some laymen. Advocates of a strong early secular context for writing relied on speculative over-interpretation of dubious material. Now, however, objects with non-ecclesiastical writing are more than numerous enough, and just about early enough, to call into question the extent to which the Church was exclusively responsible for introducing and sustaining the technology;[14] 'non-standard' ways of writing turn out to have their own regularity, their own 'standards',[15] which simply happen not to coincide with Church Slavonic norms; a culture of urban secular writing flourished.

These sorts of questions are traditional, although in the Rus context the answers are relatively new (or rather, the opportunity to support such answers with authentic material is relatively new). In Part I of the present book I focus mainly on the traditional questions, surveying the evidence for written culture and its development, building on the achievements of those whose studies of sources have made a new general survey possible, and necessary. Existing surveys are selective, concentrating on particular groups of sources (e.g. manuscripts, or inscriptions, or birch-bark letters). Furthermore, existing surveys tend to concentrate on writing either 'in itself' or in relation to its producers. Here I attempt to take a more holistic approach, to break down some of the barriers and categories, to attempt a more comprehensive overview of written culture not only as it was created but also as it was seen and experienced, to explore the graphic environment as a whole. As a by-product of the attempt to give coherent shape to such an overview, I also suggest a new way of

[14] See the excellent summary in A. A. Medyntseva, *Gramotnost' v Drevnei Rusi. Po pamiatnikam epigrafiki X–pervoi poloviny XIII veka* (Moscow, 2000), esp. pp. 230–66. Note, however, that Medyntseva still treats 988 as an emblematic date, before which writing is 'pre-Christian' (e.g. pp. 15–16, 245): the label is of course misleading, since Christianity in Rus does not begin with the 'official' adoption of the faith.

[15] See esp. A. A. Zalizniak, *Drevnenovgorodskii dialekt* (Moscow, 1995), pp. 9–210.