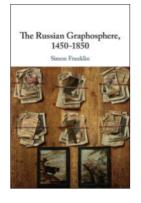# BOOK REVIEWS

## A FIELD FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

**Simon Franklin.** *The Russian Graphosphere, 1450–1850*. **Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 428 pp.**

This latest work by Slavist Simon Franklin develops out of his monograph *Writing, Society and Culture in Early Rus, c. 950–1300* (2002) and a book he co-edited in 2017, *Information and Empire: Mechanisms of Communication in Russia, 1600–1854*. It deals with what can be broadly called 'literate culture', but in a far, far broader way than typically is the case. It also possesses thought-provoking elements for those who study oral culture too, inasmuch as such a thing can even be separated from literacy in contemporary societies, or indeed in historical ones. The time period the author chooses for his study, 1450–1850, is an intriguing one, as such a span allows him to begin with the late Middle Ages and come up to the eve of modernity, to discuss both the disappearance of birch-bark as a surface for writing and the incipient age of the telegraph, to discuss the period when Muscovy was a grand duchy and that when Russia had become an empire.

But what is a 'graphosphere'? It is defined on the first page of the book as "the space of the visible word … formed wherever words are encoded, recorded, stored, disseminated and displayed through visible signs" (p. 1). Naturally enough, a graphosphere will have its own characteristics, its own history and geography, its own links with culture, society, and politics. Franklin is open about the fact that his term was coined on the model of Lotman's 'semiosphere' (p. 9). The neologism is found throughout the book in nominal form, but we also read of "graphospheric purposes" (p. 269) or that "Dutch, too, remained graphospherically insignificant" (p. 139). We even hear of "micro-graphospheres" (p. 118). Now that we have a noun, an adjective, and an adverb, can it be long before we have a verb, 'to graphosphere', too? In any event, this morphological expansiveness is all to the good, and it demonstrates the author's thoroughgoing commitment both to the term and to the notion behind it.

Within the graphosphere, Franklin distinguishes between three kinds of writing: primary, secondary, and tertiary. Primary writing is the kind of writing we are most used to, for example, manuscripts or personal letters. Secondary writing is writing on an object, which has been authorized and which forms a consistent part of that object. And tertiary writing is unauthorized writing on objects, such as graffiti. While he covers all three categories in this work, he dedicates the most attention to secondary writing,

something which can be found in a wide variety of venues: "from a brick to a bronze cannon, from a wax seal to a glass goblet, from a liturgical embroidery to an insurance company's plaque, from a snuff box to a triumphal arch, from a gravestone to a satirical print" (p. 61). Another striking list, this time of the materials that writing has appeared on and the techniques used to put it there, runs as follows: "the range of materials and techniques is huge. Visible words have been created in stone, in wood or bark, in ceramics from clay tablets to porcelain, in metals, glass, textiles, plaster, wax, even on the living body. They have been painted and drawn, scratched, chiselled and carved, moulded and cast, stamped and embossed, sewn, seared with heat or acid" (p. 3).

The book is organized as follows. The first chapter deals with concepts and context, and the two subsequent chapters discuss primary and secondary writing, respectively. Franklin then turns to the graphosphere's scripts and languages in his fourth chapter, and its places and times in the fifth. In the sixth chapter he considers the 'ecology' of the graphosphere, before turning to remark upon aspects of authority and status in the seventh chapter. The final chapter of the book, entitled '(In)conclusion', begins with the words "Where is the grand narrative?" (p. 268). The author makes certain apologetic remarks here to the effect that the book is more of "a series of surveys and investigations, … [than] a presentation of a thesis" or an integrated chronological account. Perhaps he apologizes too much, for he is far from being oblivious of the context of technological, economic, political, and institutional aspects that impinge upon the graphosphere (e.g., "the early modern state owed its growth in part to the exploitation of handwriting" (p. 270)), and, as he points out, while his work may lack a plot, there are two recurrent sub-plots. These are the semantics of letters, and the relations between graphospheric fact and graphospheric imagination. The book proper is followed by a massive apparatus (pp. 275–414) that is made up of 77 pages of notes, 46 pages of bibliographies (of both 'catalogues and editions' and 'studies'), and a 14-page index. The work is illustrated with black and white photographs, though a few of these (e.g., 4.1 and 4.2) could do with being reproduced more clearly.

Folklore appears at times in Franklin's book, for example in the origin story of the thumb gesture for requesting drink (p. 101). And the presence of folklore in the graphosphere is now and again underlined in his discussions of *lubki*, graffiti, or even of the fact that the bells on horses' yokes were "often inscribed with a brief phrase or folkloric tag … [such as] 'kogo liubliu, togo dariu'" (p. 81). He also talks about a 'domestic graphosphere', which can include phenomena such as the writing on the painted tiles on stoves. But as it is not his especial focus, the work leaves much folkloric matter untouched – or perhaps it would be better to say, opens up the field for further investigation.

Folklorists have always known about the co-existence of and interactions between the oral and the literate sphere – the very first work of 'Mr. Folklore', a.k.a. William John Thoms, was on folk-books – but we have sometimes forgotten popular literacy and we have not always been officious in seeking out the traces of handwriting or (especially)

print in oral culture. In recent years, a large number of specialists, such as Adam Fox, to name just one, have reminded us of the links between oral and literate culture. One particular area of research out of several has been a growing recognition of the role of newspapers in the spread of folk narrative – the names of Caroline Sumpter and Katre Kikas come to mind here. And I remember staff members when I was at Sheffield, whose research encompassed 'secondary writing' (though they did not use the term) – using records of the names of medieval ships as a source of linguistic and cultural data or studying the inscriptions on coins as a source of evidence for placenames. It was no coincidence that those who did this were among the most folklore-friendly of the faculty. There is clearly much more for folklorists to investigate within the graphosphere (including the digital graphosphere), in addition to our traditional focus on what Franklin calls at one point the 'audiosphere' (p. 128).

In one sense, the book, although it is the result of a great deal of work, is really a first move in opening up and establishing a field of study that is at once intriguing and incomplete. I imagine that a book about the Roman, rather than the Russian, graphosphere would dedicate a much larger focus to grave inscriptions than this book did, but I am not quite sure whether this is because the evidence does not survive also in Russia or whether because the author's focus was on other, less familiar objects of study. In this regard, Franklin's remarks about blank forms (another fascinating, overlooked topic!) are emblematic: "a great deal of evidence surely remains untouched, undiscovered, unidentified, and the present summary will need modification" (p. 214). Nevertheless, the work stands as an example to others studying the Russian graphosphere, as well as to those studying also other traditions.

Jonathan Roper
University of Tartu