This is an unusual book in several respects. Firstly, it presents a synthesis of current knowledge about the written heritage of early Rus in many fields: paleography (in its restricted meaning, concentrating on what the author calls “parchment literacy”, p. 22), berestology (I may be forgiven for coining this term to designate the study of birch-bark documents), diplomatics, numismatics, and sphragistics, not to forget occasional forays into the history of art and archeology proper. The author, moreover, does not limit himself to this report; he also puts his synthesis in a larger context, viz. the society and culture in which writing existed. By proceeding from the particular to the more general, he avoids the original sin of many so-called cultural studies that choose the opposite approach and usually fall prey to the temptation to make facts (or rather findings) fit the theory. Thirdly, the book is very much up to date, and this in most of the fields covered by the author; the latest publication quoted is from 2001 (p. 112, n. 119), and usually all the relevant literature in a particular area is adduced (and sometimes qualified, cf. the scathing criticism of a book published by Я. Н. Щапов, p. 19). Furthermore the book meets high scholarly standards. The author is very sober-minded and rather sceptical of far-reaching generalisations, sweeping statements, and hypothetical reconstructions. He leaves no doubt about his opinions concerning colleagues who indulge in such scholarly pastimes as the following asides indicate: “The sparser the evidence, the more fertile the speculation” (p. 89). “One cannot but be impressed by the ingenuity and tenacity of the hypotheses and speculations about pre-Cyrillic native writing. The net result, however, is a swelling mass of grand theories and visions conjured out of the thinnest of air” (p. 93). “Lack of sufficient evidence is rarely a deterrent to hypothetical reconstruction, and there is no shortage of modern systematic accounts of early Rus education” (p. 205). “None of these assertions – one hesitates to label all of them ‘hypotheses’ – is founded on anything more solid than wishful thinking” (p. 206).

But one asset of the book to be singled out particularly is its style. In general it makes for unusually pleasant reading, and this in itself is rather uncommon for a scholarly publication. The blurb refers to the “idiosyncratic wit of this volume” and the reader may have sensed some of it in the quotations above. But there is more to it. Simon Franklin (S. F.) seems to enjoy chiastic constructions using the same words, sometimes producing statements bordering on contradiction: “Writing is a form of depiction, or, more simply, depiction is writing” (p. 2). “The writing of meaning is only a part of the meaning of writing” (p. 3; similarly “The writing of meaning is only one of the meanings of writing”, p. 255). “In terms of glib contrast: psalters are comparatively under-represented through
overuse, while de luxe copies of Gospel lectionaries may be comparatively over-represented through underuse” (p. 25). “Beyond the hypothetical unity of Common Slavonic (or the unity of hypothetical Common Slavonic) we have to tread very carefully …” (p. 83). “Although lack of evidence is not necessarily evidence of lack, …” (p. 202). The same playful use of language can even be found in a sequence of headings: “Writing and learning . . . Learning about writing . . . Writing about learning” (pp. VII–VIII). Sometimes his rhetorical formulae come close to the figura etymologica: “Literature should not always be interpreted literally . . .” (p. 194). “The medieval fusion can cause modern confusion . . .” (p. 229). This ludic attitude to language is rather enjoyable; only rarely does it border on the ludicrous. The author tries to strike a balance between terse scholarly statements, paying tribute to the traditions of his trade, and a reader-oriented presentation that may come in rather unexpected form, such as a quiz (p. 35) or multiple-choice questions (p. 217) or even a virtual tour of an orthodox church (or is it a tour of a virtual orthodox church? [p. 233; S. F. prefers to call it “imaginary”]).

A review has to stick to the conventions established by tradition and therefore a general appraisal of form such as the one given above will not suffice. But going through the different sections of the book one has to begin by addressing formal questions again, since this is what the author does himself. In a “Note on transliteration, citation and terminology” (pp. XI–XII), he explains the policy followed in the book. In the onymic section of this note, he concentrates on anthroponymy and explains why he refrains from unifying names and adhering to a single principle. Another inconsistency that he does not mention is the treatment of saints. Some of them are always referred to as “St X” (such as St Demetrios), some are never given the honorific title due to them (e. g. Hyppolitos of Rome) and others are situated somewhere in between (such as [St] Cyril, sainted on pages 89 and 93, but not elsewhere). An interesting case is St Peter: he is sainted when mentioned alone or with other saints, but not when his companion is Paul. Other paired saints do not fare better (Kosmas and Damian, Cyril and Methodios, Boris and Gleb). The problem of toponymy is not addressed at all. In general, the author seems to follow the established Russian (or Soviet) tradition in using Russian toponymy regardless of location; the only bow to more recent developments in toponymy seems to be “Belarus” (p. 56).

In the introduction (pp. 1–15) several preliminary questions are touched upon (the reader will be content to note that from now on the emphasis in this review will be on content). It is first of all the time span chosen by the author, since “circa 1300” (p. 2) is not the usual break-off date. The beginning of the “Tatar yoke” (S. F. does not use the expression so dear to the Russian tradition but prefers “Mongol invasions”, p. 1) around 1237 would seem to be more appropriate. Given the topic of the book, it makes sense to extend the upper limit since culture is slow