

[Rez.:] Jos Schaeken, *Voices on Birchbark. Everyday Communication in Medieval Russia* (Studies in Slavic and General Linguistics, 43).  
Leiden–Boston: Brill 2019. 212 pp.

The 1951 discovery in post-war Novgorod of birchbarks with writing on them brought a completely new, and unexpected, object to Slavic Philology, vastly expanding its historical depth (esp. for the 11th–14th centuries), our understanding of the development of individual East Slavic languages and their sociolinguistic setting. Made possible only through the cooperation of archaeologists and linguists, we now have at hand more than 1.200 birchbarks, documented in print and also online (<http://gramoty.ru/birchbark/>).

Although many individual texts, topics and features of birchbark letters have seen publication in Russia and abroad, the present book is a very welcome addition since it is not so much aimed at specialists in the field as at a broader audience among advanced students of Slavic Philology and linguists in general curious to learn more about this phenomenon, which has no counterpart in any other Slavic country. The author, Jos Schaeken from Leiden (NL), is a well-known specialist in the field, and the book itself is an updated and expanded version of a first edition (from 2012) in Dutch, thus greatly extending its reach.

The book is composed of three parts, *Writing on Birchbark*, *Communication in Daily Life*, and *Pragmatics of Communication*, each subdivided into several chapters. The 2012 version has been enriched with maps, graphs, drawings of birchbarks and some photographs (in black and white), as well as two colour photographs at the end, one of them showing the first-ever birchbark found. The 18-page bibliography might also have included Müller-Wille, M. et al. (eds.): *Novgorod. Das mittelalterliche Zentrum und sein Umland im Norden Rußlands*, Neumünster 2001. An index of birchbarks references all items mentioned in the text by their official number, and a short subject index makes looking up specific topics easy. There is, however, no index of names. The sub-title of the book refers to *Medieval Russia*, but the reader should be aware that writing on birchbark was specific to Northern Russia with Novgorod at its centre. Thus, results about everyday communication in Novgorod (and in Pskov and Staraja Russa, areas to which this form of writing spread) cannot be generalised as representing all of medieval Rus’.

From the *Acknowledgements* the reader learns about the background of the book, and, more importantly, about the first-hand knowledge the author has of his subject, and also about the support he has received from leading Russian scholars. One special challenge has been the transliteration of birchbark texts into English. The Old Russian versions and their translations into Russian can conveniently be looked up in the aforementioned online portal – they are not duplicated here. The *Preface* presents birchbarks as allowing “fascinating insights into everyday life, trade, law ... and personal communication in a vibrant medieval culture“ (XIV). It is somewhat ironical that we only know these birchbarks today because they were thrown away onto the ground (often torn up first) while important texts that were meant to be preserved were written on parchment. To this category belong the well-known Novgorodian Chronicles mainly recording state affairs, wars, famine, drought, etc.

Part I of Schaeken's monograph begins with a chapter on the *Historical and Geographical Context*, sketching the history of Novgorod from the 9th century, its internal political organisation and population, and its fate as an independent principality that ended in 1478 under Ivan III. The fall of Novgorod also coincides with the end of birchbark writing, which was afterwards completely forgotten until rediscovered in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Chapter 2 contains information about the locations in which birchbark texts have been found with over 90% deriving from Novgorod. Staraja Russa, south of Lake Il'men, is a far behind number two with 4% of the findings. The author is convinced that birchbark writing must have been much more widespread in other cities in Northern Russia, where fewer excavations have been possible. *Dating and Periodization* of birchbarks are treated in Chapter 3. Thanks to stratigraphy and dendrochronology they can be dated very precisely ( $\pm 10$ – $15$  years), sometimes even more precisely when persons known from the state chronicles are involved. A graph (p. 28) clearly shows that the majority of birchbark findings are from the 12th century, when Novgorod blossomed economically, i.e. before the Mongol-Tatar invasion. Having started shortly after the conversion of Rus' to Christianity (in 988), however, the decline in writing was not due only to external factors; it was preceded by an internal power struggle between boyars around 1200, which also had a noticeable effect, as the author convincingly shows.

*Writing Technology and Practice* are discussed in Chapter 4. Here the author gives more information about the process of writing on birchbark with a stylus, the sizes of these documents, and the state of their preservation – roughly one-third present the original texts in its entirety, and the examples for the book are chosen from this group. Text lengths vary, but short lengths prevail (<20 words), which is why they have often been called 'letters' – based on their contents, letters constitute a little less than half of all birchbarks. No exact statistics for text (or sentence) length are given here but would be very useful for future research. Chapter 5 focuses on *Users and Literacy*. The author explains that judging from the contents most of the users belonged to a wealthy social elite, although writing was in principle open to everyone. Clearly, that does not mean that all senders and recipients were literate themselves – sometimes, messengers would not only transport letters, but also write them first. As birchbarks were more like open postcards or memos, users faced much the same problems in concealing their identities from outside parties as they would today – and they found ways of doing this before throwing the messages away.

The short Chapter 6 deals with another interesting aspect, namely *Intersections between Birchbark Writing and Graffiti*. Here, the author cites evidence on names and persons gained from random inscriptions in churches. They prove, first and foremost, linguistic and cultural contact with Turks and offer evidence of journeys from Novgorod to Constantinople. Part I concludes with the short Chapter 7, titled *Language and Communication*. In it, the author first touches upon examples of how our understanding of the character strings on the birchbarks depends – and has evolved with – our general knowledge of the Novgorodian dialect. He goes on to demonstrate that one can find linguistic variants as well as various registers in the birchbark texts, including even OCS.

Part II, *Communication in Daily Life*, starts with a single page *Preliminary Remarks* regarding the selection of topics and examples for this part of the monograph while at the same time already outlining the different perspective that will be the basis for Part III. The chapters in Part II are arranged thematically, beginning with the most important topic, *Commerce and Finance*, in Chapter 2. Taken out of their original context, the pragmatic intention of letters and lists can sometimes be hard to understand when it is not clear whether goods have already been delivered or will be sent, whether prices indicate payments due or are records of payments already made. Here, the author chooses his examples to also demonstrate inter-city trade with towns nearby (Staraja Russa) and far away (Suzdal'). An interesting fact mentioned several times is that birchbarks have several layers, the topmost of which could be peeled off, for example to keep a copy of a business transaction. *Law and Administration* is next (Chapter 3), with examples of theft, betrayal, punishment and last wills. (On page 77 the author mentions the toponym *Ozero* 'Lake' adding only that the place in question must have been nearby because the message and the required answer needed to go back and forth quickly. He leaves it open, however, where to locate this place. From archaeological investigations, it would seem plausible that it was in the region called *Poozer'e*, which lies along the Verjaža just south of Novgorod. The many settlements by this river yielded a wealth of findings.) The next topic to be treated in detail is *Estate Management*, which became more prominent in the later centuries of birchbark writing (Chapter 4), and is followed by *Family Life and Household Management* (Chapter 5), in which among the examples included we find the famous proposal from N377 ('marry me') and the well-known letter from Nastas'ja to Boris (N43). Birchbark N377 (p. 99) is an example where Schaeken's book incorporates re-readings of older decipherments. Writing as a mass-phenomenon cannot occur without schooling, and Chapter 6 is devoted to *Learning to Read and Write*, featuring prominently the well-known texts and drawings by the schoolboy Onfim. *Church, Religion, and Folk Belief* are the subject of Chapter 7. Among other things, the reader will learn here that the same monks who were writing on parchment used birchbark for everyday communication. Chapter 8 concentrates on *Witnesses to History*, i.e. historical events – mainly conflicts – reflected in birchbark texts. Part II concludes with *Non-Slavic on Birchbark*, not so much a thematic chapter per se but related to communication nevertheless. Foreign languages (Finnic, German, Latin, Greek) and scripts (Greek, Latin) occur only sporadically on birchbarks.

*Pragmatics of Communication* is the topic of Part III, in which the author aims to provide "case studies of specific texts in their function of organising and maintaining social networks" (141). Orality, the function of the messenger (often not simply the postillion), one-to-many communications, and a reconstruction of social networks are all treated here in separate chapters. This last section is probably the most innovative one with regard to birchbarks, and it nicely rounds up the whole book. The point of the first section is to demonstrate that birchbarks were supposed to be read aloud to the recipient. This becomes clear when there are two different messages to two different recipients on one birchbark, and the orality is stressed by the fact that responses use the phrase "I hear what you say", not "I have read what you say". The messenger might also be the beneficiary of an action expected from the recipient

(“give this man...”). The reconstruction of networks is possible thanks to the fact that there are several cases where multiple letters have been sent back and forth by people connected in various ways. The connections range from simple to quite complex (see p. 178). These last chapters demonstrate that the study of birchbark texts has long left the domain of historical grammar studies and has become an interesting subject for modern linguistic approaches as well.

Overall, the book is readable, well-founded and informative, especially in providing an overview of its subject, sketching general lines of development and setting things in context. It is fully recommended for any aspiring student of Slavic philology, and, indeed, it could be put to great use in a teaching context. However, its use is not limited to such a scenario – it will be useful even for researchers already familiar with certain aspects of birchbark writing or a limited number of texts. What this book does not do and does not intend to do is to present palaeography, phonetics, grammar, syntax, onomastics, etc. I would imagine that for a future edition, a chapter on Novgorodian archaeology, the process of (carefully) unrolling newly-found birchbarks and preserving them for posterity could be added, and pictures of archaeological findings besides birchbarks, which include toys and tools, could benefit the general reader as well as archaeologists.