

Birchbark Literacy and the Rise of Written Communication in Early Rus'

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Milestones in the history of science occasionally coincide in time. So it was sixty years ago in the archaeology of Medieval Rus'. Two years flanking the mid-twentieth-century mark brought archaeological discoveries, which in the course of time yielded an essentially new vision of early Rus' written culture. In the summer of 1951, the first nine birchbark documents were unearthed at the Nerev excavation site (*Nerevskij raskop*) by the Novgorod Archaeological Expedition, headed by Artemij V. Artsikhovskij.¹ This discovery proved the by then totally accepted notion of the almost entirely ecclesiastical character of writing in pre-Mongol Rus' to be false. It provided insight into the realm of lay practical writing,² which proved to have been flourishing in Novgorod from about the same time (the mid-eleventh century) that the earliest surviving dated parchment manuscripts were written. Since then archaeologists have been finding more and more documents each year and similar finds have also been made in eleven other medieval Russian towns. By the end of 2011 the birchbark corpus consisted of 1120 documents (*gramoty*) dating from the mid-eleventh to the mid-fifteenth century, of which 1018 are

¹ A.V. ARTSIKHOVSKIJ, M.N. TIKHOMIROV, *Новгородские грамоты на бересте (из раскопок 1951 г.)* [Novgorod Documents on Birchbark (from the Excavation Year 1951)] (Ī oscow, 1953).

² Notions of 'practical writing / literacy' and 'pragmatic writing / literacy' are used in this article as synonyms.

from Novgorod excavations. Half of the birchbark documents unearthed so far are dated from the pre-Mongol time (the eleventh to early thirteenth century).³

Two years before Artsikhovskij's triumph in Novgorod, another discovery was made in Gnezdovo (near Smolensk), where Daniil Avdusin's campaign in 1949 unearthed a pot dated to the first quarter of the tenth century and bearing a Cyrillic inscription, most plausibly a mark of ownership ("belonging to Gorun").⁴ Although not succeeded by analogous finds (as happened in Novgorod), the Gnezdovo inscription alone produced a sensation. It was accepted as the long-awaited proof of the statement that the history of Slavonic writing in Rus' did not begin with the official Conversion of Rus' by Prince Vladimir Svjatoslavich in 988, but that it began at least half a century earlier. Until the find this idea had remained pure speculation, resting mainly on an over-interpretation of the evidence of Rus'-Byzantine treaties preserved in the Russian Primary Chronicle.⁵ The Gnezdovo inscription was another thing. Supplemented by a handful of inscribed objects with early datings discovered in the subsequent decades, it succeeded in substantiating the hypothesis of 'pre-Christian' writing in Rus', which in its more or less refined forms flourishes today.

The most recent studies in the field even tend to deprive the date of the official Conversion of any real significance for the development of early Rus-

³ For details of the geographical distribution of birchbark documents and their chronology, see J. SCHAEKEN in this volume (with a reference to publications and basic literature in n. 1). General information about the corpus along with its full electronic publication is also accessible at <http://gramoty.ru> (version in English in preparation, to be available in 2011). The majority of the birchbark documents (about 60 percent) consists of private letters. These are concerned with various aspects of everyday life – household, family, financial and commercial matters, and so on. Closely related to this category are collective petitions, mostly from peasants to their feudal masters. Another sizeable group of the documents is made up of various financial and economic records (mainly lists of debts and inventories of payments of different kinds). A special category is comprised of labels indicating the name of the owner. The remainder (about 10 percent) of the birchbark documents consists of the following categories: a) drafts of official documents – wills, contracts, receipts, etc.; b) educational items – alphabets, writing exercises, etc.; c) literary and folklore items; d) ecclesiastical items.

⁴ D.A. AVDUSIN and M.N. ТИХОМИРОВ, “Ἀδῶαι ἀεὸ ἄῶ δόνῆἄῶ ἰ ἄἰ ἔῆῆ” [The oldest Russian inscription], *Вестник Академии наук СССР* [Bulletin of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR] 1 (1950), pp. 71-79; for further details, see A.A. МЕДЫНТСЕВА, *Грамотность в Древней Руси: По памятникам эпиграфики X – первой половины XIII в.* [Literacy in Old Rus': Based on the Epigraphic Monuments of the Tenth-First Half of the Thirteenth Century] (Moscow, 2000), pp. 21-31.

⁵ In fact, the treaties dated 907, 911, 944 and 971 have been preserved in translations from Greek, most probably made in the early twelfth century. See J. MALINGOUDI, *Die russisch-byzantinischen Verträge des 10. Jhds. aus diplomatischer Sicht* (Thessaloniki, 1994).

sian writing, regarding it as a purely symbolic one. While Albina A. Medyntseva in her monograph published in 2000 adheres to the traditional scheme, dividing the chronological scope of her study into periods before and after 988,⁶ Simon Franklin in his influential book *Writing, Society and Culture in Early Rus, c. 950-1300* takes a very different position on this aspect. He speaks of an internally homogeneous “gestation period” stretching through to the mid-eleventh century, with no visible barrier in the late 980s:

The catalyst for the expansion in the uses of Cyrillic was undoubtedly the spread of Christianity. The important process here was the spread of the faith, not necessarily the official Conversion in the late 980s. The pattern of surviving evidence for uses of writing in the half-century after the official Conversion is not fundamentally different from the pattern of surviving evidence for the half-century prior to the official Conversion. No obvious dividing-line appears at 988. The more significant break, amply witnessed in all types of source, occurs around the middle of the eleventh century /.../. Before this period direct evidence for any kind of locally produced writing is sporadic and sparse; after this period direct evidence for virtually all kinds of locally produced writing is strong, continuous, and increasingly abundant.⁷

Crucially important for this chronological pattern is the statement according to which the earliest specimens of Slav script from Rus’ derive from non-confessional contexts.⁸ Looked at in this perspective, the emergence of birchbark literacy in the second quarter of the eleventh century has to be regarded as the result of a century-long “gestation” of pragmatic writing, whose genesis – in respect to Rus’ – must have been different from that of confessional writing. Indeed, Franklin posits the existence of twin catalysts for the spread of writing in Rus’: on the one hand the Church, which produced “institution-based” ecclesiastical writing; and on the other commerce and financial dealings and administration, which produced “activity-based” writing, predominantly of a secular character.⁹ The latter, according to Franklin, preceded the former in its development in the lands of Rus’.

Plausible as it may seem, this pattern, under close examination, turns out to rest on shaky ground. This does not refer to the barrier falling on the mid-

⁶ MEDYNTSEVA, *Грамотность*, pp. 230-255.

⁷ S. FRANKLIN, *Writing, Society and Culture in Early Rus, c. 950-1300* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 122-123.

⁸ FRANKLIN, *Writing, Society and Culture in Early Rus*, p. 12.

⁹ FRANKLIN, *Writing, Society and Culture in Early Rus*, p. 276.



Fig. 1. Wooden cylinder-lock No. 6, first half of the eleventh century. Photo by Stanislav Orlov.

If so, then the Gnezdovo inscription is likely to be a monument of Bulgarian rather than of East Slavonic epigraphy.

The inscription on the Svjatoslav seal is poorly preserved; the letters that have remained from the name might be both Cyrillic and Greek. The latter is more plausible, taking into consideration that it was Byzantium, which according to the treaty of 944, demanded the presentation of seals from Rus' ambassadors.

The problem with the Novgorod wooden cylinders is of another kind. Here we are dealing with an undoubtedly East Slavic text written in Cyrillic (see Figure 1): *мѣцъницъ мѣхъ въ тыхъзм-гѣ полъ цътвзръ(тѣ)* ("The sack of a *mechnik* (administrative officer). In Tikhmenga three (*grivnas*) and a half").¹³

¹³ V.L. JANIN and A.A. ZALIZNJAK, "Í ääï èñè í à òèèèí äðàð" [Inscriptions on cylinders], in: *Новгородские грамоты на бересте (из раскопок 1997-2000 гг.)* [Novgorod Documents

Yet the proposed early dating rests entirely on the attribution of the “princely marks”, which remains very controversial.¹⁴ Archaeologically, the two cylinders are broadly dated to the late tenth until the first half of the eleventh century, and nothing prevents us from ascribing them to the latter part of this period.¹⁵ The inadequacy of the initial dating became apparent in 1999, when thirty-nine cylinders of the same type, all dated to the eleventh century, were discovered in the same area.

The first irrefutable specimens of the native use of Slav writing in Rus’ are the inscriptions on the coins that Vladimir began to mint in imitation of the Byzantine model after his conversion.¹⁶ Together with the coins of Vladimir’s sons Jaroslav and Svjatopolk minted before 1019, they provide solid evidence for the administrative use of writing in the first two decades after the conversion. This group of evidence has been recently supplemented by the seal of Jaroslav Vladimirovich found in Novgorod and archaeologically dated to the first quarter of the eleventh century.¹⁷ Still more important was the sensational find made in Novgorod in the year 2000, when a set of three waxed wooden tablets retaining their writing – the text of Psalms 75 and 76 – was unearthed at the Trinity site (*Troitskij raskop*).¹⁸ The tablets were found 30 centimetres beneath a log dated to 1036, which implies that they had found their way into

on Birchbark (from the Excavations of 1997-2000)], ed. V.L. JANIN, A.A. ZALIZNJAK and A.A. GIPPIUS (Moscow, 2004), pp. 137-145, at p. 139.

¹⁴ For the criticism, see: S.V. BELETSKIJ, “Í à-àëî ðõññêî é ããðàëüüäëèè (çí àèè Ðð ðè-êî àè-âé X-XI ââ.)” [The beginning of Russian heraldics (princely marks of the Rurikides of the tenth-eleventh centuries)], in: *У источника. Вып. 1. Сборник статей в честь члена-корреспондента РАН С. М. Каштанова* [By the Source, 1, Collection of Articles in Honour of the Correspondent-Member of RAS S.M. Kashtanov], ed. S.V. BELETSKIJ *et al.* (Moscow, 1997), pp. 93-171, at pp. 144-145; A.A. GIPPIUS, “Ñî òèî êòëüðòðî äü äèí àì èèà ì èññü à ã Æðââí âé Ðñèè” [The socio-cultural dynamics of writing in Old Rus’], *Русский язык в научном освещении* [The Russian Language From a Scholarly Perspective] 1.7 (2004), pp. 171-194, at pp. 186-187.

¹⁵ As Janin himself admits in his full publication of the Novgorod cylinders, see V.L. JANIN, *У истоков новгородской государственности* [The Origins of Novgorod’s Statehood] (Velikij Novgorod, 2001) (Novgorod, 2001), p. 61.

¹⁶ M.P. СОТНИКОВА, *Древнейшие русские монеты X-XI веков: Каталог и исследование* [The Oldest Russian Coins of the Tenth-Eleventh Centuries: Catalogue and Study] (Moscow, 1995).

¹⁷ V.L. JANIN and P.G. GAJDUKOV, *Актовые печати Древней Руси* [Documentary Seals of Old Rus’] 3 (Í oscow, 1998), pp. 13-19.

¹⁸ V.L. JANIN and Æ.Æ. ZALIZNJAK, “Í î äâî ðî äñèè é êî äâèñ î äðâî é -âðââððè XI â. – äðââí âéð äü êî èââ Ðñèè” [The Novgorod Codex from the first quarter of the eleventh century – the oldest book of Rus’], *Вопросы языкознания* [Issues of Linguistics] 2001.5, pp. 3-25.

the ground in the very beginning of the eleventh century. With the find of this oldest East Slavic codex, the book culture of the Vladimir time ceased to be a matter of speculation and became a reality.

The pattern emerging from the evidence just described speaks in favour of the traditional view of the official Conversion as the real beginning of the systematic use of Slav writing in the lands of Rus'. Not a single piece of native East Slav writing can unambiguously be dated to the time before 988, whereas for the decades immediately following this date the specimens of Cyrillic writing, though not numerous, provide undisputable evidence of its use in both confessional and administrative contexts.

The actual evidence, as we can see, does not support the claim that the native use of writing first appeared in East Slavic lands in non-confessional contexts. According to Franklin:

[a]lthough the Slav script had been devised to serve missionary purposes, by the tenth century its uses in Bulgaria had extended well beyond the ecclesiastical, so that Christianisation was by no means a precondition for contact with or use of such script in Rus.¹⁹

However, contact with writing and the use of writing are different things. Theoretically, we can imagine a pagan Rus' merchant of the tenth century learning Cyrillic as ideologically neutral information technology facilitating the conduct of business with Bulgarians. It would have been more plausible, perhaps, to connect the earliest specimens of commercial writing to a limited spread of Christian faith before the official Conversion. But as we have already seen, for the period before 988 such specimens are simply lacking. When they do appear in the first half of the eleventh century, this happens against the background of already-existing local confessional writing as exemplified by the Novgorod wax Psalter.

It is also important that the very use of birchbark as writing material is first attested in Novgorod in neither commercial nor administrative contexts. The earliest birchbark documents unearthed so far are: No. 915-I (see Figure 2), an icon bearing on its two sides the images of the Saviour and St Barbara, with corresponding inscriptions; and No. 591 (see Figure 3), an alphabet. Both are dated to the 1030s.

¹⁹ FRANKLIN, *Writing, Society and Culture in Early Rus*, p. 121.

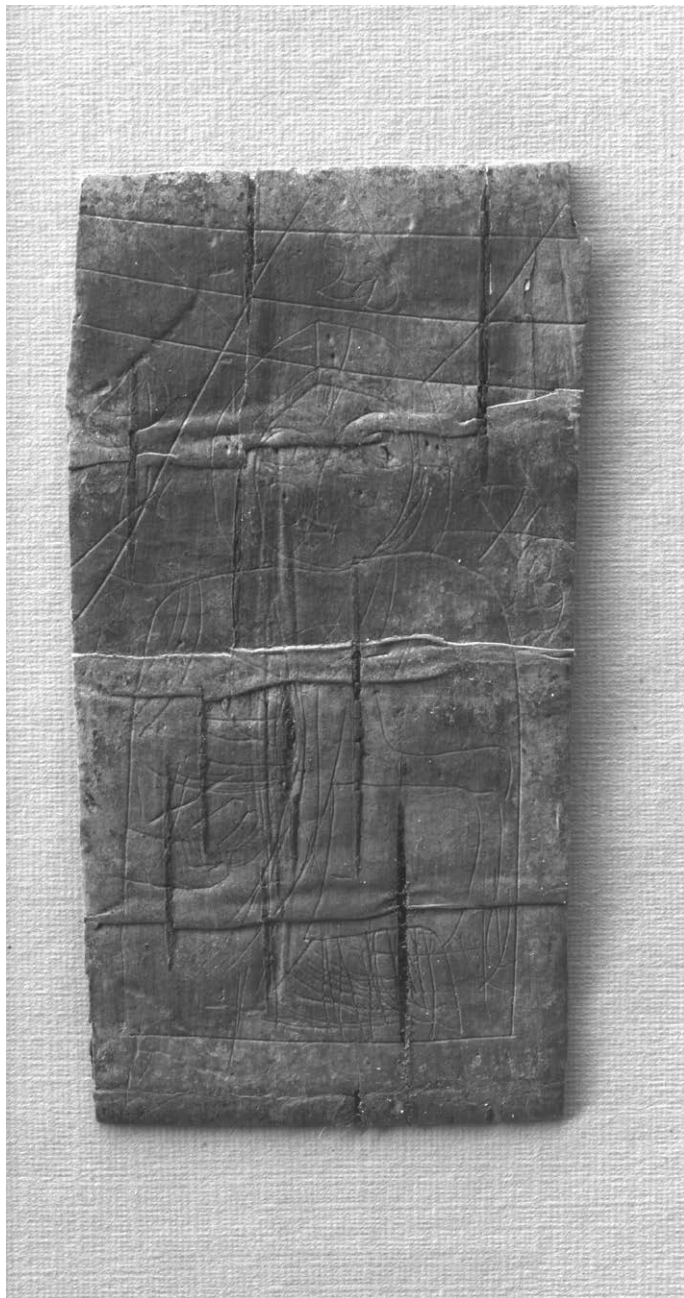


Fig. 2a. No. 915-I
(r): Icon of Christ
from the 1030s.
Photo by the "EPOS"
group. Courtesy of
V.L. Janin.

Fig. 2b. No. 915-I (v): Icon of St Barbara, from the 1030s. Photo by the “EPOS” group. Courtesy of V.L. Janin.





Fig. 3. No. 591: the oldest Russian alphabet, from the 1030s (fragment). Photo by the “EPOS” group; courtesy of V.L. Janin.

An alphabet as a category of birchbark writing is connected to the teaching process. From the later birchbark documents, we know pretty well what this process looked like in Novgorod. Its subsequent stages are represented by the school exercises of the thirteenth-century boy Onfim (Nos. 199-208, 210, 331), which include an alphabet, rows of syllables with varying vowels and consonants (see Figure 4) and, finally, prayers and excerpts from liturgical texts, mainly from the Psalms.

Once acquired, the skill of reading and writing Cyrillic could easily be applied to a range of purposes, including not only confessional but also lay ones. In the early Middle Ages the linguistic distance between most Slavic languages remained relatively small, making them mutually understandable. Church Slavonic, although imported to Rus’ from Bulgaria, was perceived by eastern Slavs as a literary form of their own language. This made it possible for ordinary people not only to understand church books (to a certain degree, of course) without special training, but also to write down in the same script any utterance in the vernacular, with or without attempts to make it closer to the linguistic register adopted by the Church. How easy this passage from reading Church Slavonic to writing the vernacular was is shown by the records of the same Onfim also containing, besides the liturgical excerpts, ‘commercial’²⁰

²⁰ Texts of birchbark letters are cited according to their publication in A.A. ZALIZNJAK, *Древненовгородский диалект* [The Old Novgorod Dialect] (Moscow, 2005). Square brackets are used to enclose doubtful or partially preserved letters, round brackets to enclose pure conjectures. English translations made by Roman Kovalev and partly revised by the author are



Fig. 4. No. 199: Onfim's school exercise (syllables), mid-thirteenth century. Photo by the "EPOS" group; courtesy of V.L. Janin.

taken from the database (to appear at www.gramoty.ru).

records imitating those made by adults: на домитръѣ возати доложникѣ (No. 202, “To take debts from Dmitr”).

Yet the situation of the mid-thirteenth century was different from that of the first half of the eleventh century. Onfim, when making his quasi-commercial records, followed the routine practice of his time. In the 1030s, when the alphabet No. 591 was written, this practice was unknown; it still had to be invented. The chronology of birchbark documents tells us that this happened in the second quarter of the eleventh century, closer to the end of it. Why then?

The answer is provided by the so-called Novgorod-Sofia group of Russian chronicles. Here, under the year 1030, we read that Jaroslav the Wise, after having defeated the Finno-Ugric tribe of Chud’:

è núaðà î ò ñòàðí ñòú è î ò ïïïîâ äððèè 300 ó:èðè èí èãàì . È ï ðãñðààèñý
 àððèèâí èñéí ï Àèèì ï; è áÿø á ó:áí èéú äâí Áò ðâì ü, èæá í ú ó:àø á.

came to Novgorod and gathered 300 children of clergy and nobility to teach them books. And the archbishop Iakim passed away, and his disciple was Efrem, who taught us.²¹

Although ‘teaching’ in this context should certainly be understood in a broader sense than an elementary school education, instead referring to Christian education as a whole, teaching in the narrow sense must have been presupposed by Jaroslav’s order. Practical literacy was a social convention, which in order to be realised needed a literate milieu able to accept it. The formation of such a milieu was the result of Jaroslav’s initiative. It was the generation of the Novgorod elite that ‘went to school’ in about 1030 who, when grown up, began to write letters to one another and keep records on birchbark.

Franklin rightly speaks of the spontaneous character of “activity-based” commercial and lay administrative writing, which opposed it to the “institution-based” ecclesiastical writing:

Lay Slavonic writing was a practical convenience, not an institutional imperative. Its proliferation was not due to policy or to regulation, but to an accumulation of spontaneous decisions by individuals.²²

²¹ PSRL = *Polnoe Sobranie Russkikh Letopisej* [Complete Collection of the Russian Chronicles] 42, p. 63.

²² FRANKLIN, *Writing, Society and Culture in Early Rus*, p. 276.

One should bear in mind, however, that the very acquisition of literacy skills was possible only via school education, catechetical in its character. Secular practical literacy in Rus' thus presents itself as a spontaneous by-product of the spread of Christian education, which itself was a prerogative of church institutions.

It is therefore not surprising that a considerable portion of the birchbark documents dated to the eleventh century are, either by their contents or by their archaeological context, connected to the life of the Church. This can be seen from the example of the two oldest birchbark letters from the second quarter of the eleventh century, found close to each other at the Nerev excavation site and bearing neighbouring numbers. In No. 246, Zhirovit demands from Stojan the money that Stojan owes to him for the "Holy wood", which is most likely to be understood as a relic – a piece of the Lord's True Cross:

Ѡ жиrowитѧ къ стоѧнови како тѣи оу мене
и чьстѣное дрѣво възъмъ и вевериць ми не
приезлеци то деvатое лето а не приезлеци
ми полоу патѣи гривнѣи а хоцоу ти взироти
въ та лоуцьшаго новъгороджанина посъли же
добръмь

From Zhirovit to Stoian. It is the ninth year since you took the Holy Wood from me and have not sent me the money. If you do not send me 4½ grivnas, I will confiscate money of the most distinguished Novgorodian for your debt. Send [it better] in a friendly way.

No. 247, a report to a city official concerning a false accusation of theft, makes special reference to the money that must be paid to the bishop:

... [п]о[кѣлѣ](п)лет[ь] сего :м̄:ми рѣзданами
а замъке кѣле а двѣри кѣлѣ а господарь въ не тажѣ не дѣе
а продади клеветьника того а оу сего смърьда въз[ати] еп̄оу
- - - - - смърьди побити клеветьник[а] ...

... accuses him with a loss of 40 rezasas. And the lock is intact and the doors are intact, and the owner does not seek a court hearing regarding this. Therefore, punish that accuser with a fine. And from this smerd (free peasant) the bishop should receive [such-and-such sum] ...

At the same time, clergy were engaged in pragmatic writing of their own. This ecclesiastical birchbark literacy constitutes a mediating link between ecclesiastical parchment literacy on the one side and lay birchbark literacy on the other. From the technological point of view, a money-lender writing down the names of debtors and sums of their debts (like No. 526) is doing basically the same thing as a priest compiling a list of saints to be mentioned in that day's service (No. 906): both are making records for memory, and it is reasonable to assume that the former is following the example set by the latter.

If ecclesiastical birchbark literacy really served as a model for the development of lay birchbark literacy, there must be a correspondence between the spread of these two types of documentation. That is exactly what we observe in comparing the two main complexes of pre-Mongol birchbark documents found in the Nerevskij and Troitskij excavations in two different districts of Novgorod – the Nerevskij and Ljudin Ends. Although the Nerevskij excavation is one and a half times as large as the Troitskij, the 'Troitskij' birchbark documents dating from the eleventh to early thirteenth century outnumber the 'Nerevskij' ones by a factor of almost four (295 : 74). On the other hand, church documents, which constitute a considerable part of the Troitskij complex (twenty-nine, i.e. about 10 percent), are almost completely absent from the Nerevskij one.

Theoretically, the two differences can be explained independently. The intensiveness of lay birchbark writing is explainable by the high social status of the inhabitants of the city district investigated at the Troitskij excavation and by the presence of civil administrative structures in the district. Of key importance from this point of view was the investigation of Property E in 1997-2000, which made it possible to determine that in the second and third quarters of the twelfth century this particular property was not a residential one but housed the city court presided over jointly by the prince and the *posadnik* (governor). The main figures of the birchbark correspondence reflecting the activity of this court have been identified with the prominent Novgorod politicians of the time — the *posadnik* Jakun Miroslavich (Jaksha) and the *boyar* Petr Mikhalkovich (Petrok), whose daughter married Prince Mstislav Jurjevich (son of Juri

Dolgoruky) in 1155 and who obviously functioned as the prince's representative in the court.²³

On the other hand, a considerable share of the church documents in the written production of the area investigated at the Troitskij excavation is apparently connected to the fact that one of the old streets that crossed this area was *Chernitzyna* ('the Nuns' Street'), named after the monastery of St Barbara, which used to be situated there. Troitskij letters from the twelfth century include fine examples of monastic correspondence (Nos. 657, 682, 717) as well as fragments of liturgical texts; like No. 727, which is a brief conspectus of the Easter service. Another property in the same Chernitzina Street, discovered and studied in the 1970s, housed the workshop of an icon- and fresco-painter named Olisey Petrovich Grechin, who was also a priest and who in 1193 was involved in the casting of lots to elect an archbishop.²⁴

However, most important of all is that in the social milieu studied at the Troitskij excavation, secular and ecclesiastical activities were not separate but instead deeply integrated. The most striking example of this integration is Olisey Grechin (mentioned above). Besides being a church artist and a priest, he was at the same time a high-ranking court official. These two sides of his personality are represented by two birchbark letters addressed to Grechin. No. 549 is a commission to paint an icon:

покланнаніє ѿ попа кзъ грѣциноу · напиши ми · шестокрї-
лендъ двѣ · в: на довоу икоунокоу
на верьхо денжсоу и цѣлоу тѣ а бзъ за мѣздою или ладивьса

Greetings from the priest to Grechin. Paint for me two six-winged angels on two icons, [so as to place] (them) above Deisis. [I] kiss you (i.e., my best regards). And as for the payment, God [will be] the guarantor or [we] will make the agreement later.

²³ See JANIN, *У истоков новгородской государственности*, pp. 6-16; A.A. GIPPIUS, "І ѿддє в єр ѿ. Ё є ааі де ѿ єєа ѿєє і адмі і аєає і і ааі ді аѣє ѿ аадапоуі ѿ ѿ адаі і ѿ XII ѿ." [Petr and Jaksha: Towards the identification of the persons of the twelfth-century Novgorod birchbark documents], *Новгородский исторический сборник* [Novgorod Historical Collection] 9 (19) (2000), pp. 18-31.

²⁴ See B.A. KOLCHIN, A.S. KHOROSHEV and V.L. JANIN, *Усадьба новгородского художника XII века* [A Property of a Twelfth-Century Novgorod Artist] (Moscow, 1981).

No. 502 is a note sent to Grechin by the *posadnik* Miroshka Nesdinich, obviously during the court session:

Ѡ мирслава к олисеви ко грициноу а [т]оу [т]и
 вѣнидѣте гавѣко полоцанино прашаи его ко=
 дѣ ти на господѣ вѣтаеть ать ти видѣло како
 ти бѣило а ивана алъ постави и пѣредѣз людѣми
 како ти вѣмоловить

From Mir(o)slav to Olisey Grechin. Soon Gavko-Polochanin will enter. Ask him where he is staying (in the city). If he saw how I arrested Ivan, put him (Gavko) before witnesses [according to how] he will answer (i.e., before those witnesses whom he will name).

Secular and ecclesiastical items occur side by side among the Troitskij documents from the very beginning of the written period. The property 'E', which in the mid-twelfth century housed a court, also served a public function a century before, though in a different way: it was a place in which state revenues brought into Novgorod were divided up. The wooden cylinder locks mentioned above were found here along with the birchbark letters dealing with the collection of tribute. Yet the birchbark icon of St Barbara was found here too, as well as the Novgorod Psalter on wax tablets.

A pair of documents found in the same archaeological context will illustrate the situation. No. 913 (see Figure 5) is a beautiful piece of mid-eleventh-century ecclesiastical writing containing a selection of Church feasts from September until the beginning of January.

No. 912 (see Figure 6) is written by the same calligraphic hand²⁵ but belongs to a very different category. It is a short business message:

грамота Ѡ [л]юдѣславѣ хотѣноу
 присѣли ми вѣверичѣ : оже
 ти свѣна не поуѣта : а присѣли

²⁵ On the palaeography of birchbark documents, see A.A. ZALIZNJAK, "Ī àěâî āđàðèÿ ááđāñòÿí ũ ò āđàì î ò" [The palaeography of birchbark documents], in: *Новгородские грамоты на бересте (из раскопок 1997-2000 гг.)*, pp. 134-274.



Fig. 5. No. 913: list of Church feasts (September-January), from the 1050s-1070s. Photo by the “EPOS” group, courtesy of V.L. Janin.

A letter (gramota) from Lyudslav to Khoten. Send me the money. Even if you don't let Sven go here, send [it nevertheless].

The sender and the addressee of this letter bear pagan Slavic names, while the person referred to in the third person is Scandinavian (Svæinn). Khoten is also the addressee of No. 902, which presents him as a state official occupied with tax collection. The scribe of the two documents could hardly have been Lyudslav, the sender of No. 912; it is much more likely that Lyudslav resorted



Fig. 6. No. 912: letter from Lyudslav to Khoten, from the 1050s-1070s. Photo by the “EPOS” group, courtesy of V.L. Janin.

to the service of some clergyman who wrote the letter for him: *cleric* acted in this case as a *clerk*. For the early stages of the development of birchbark literacy, this appears to have been a common practice.

The intermingling of ecclesiastical and secular administrative affairs, which we observe in the documents of Property E, reflects the pattern of social organisation of the Church in early Rus’ drawn by Alexander E. Musin:

Ăóđí áár ñòâî èçí à-àèúí í í á ñî ñòààèÿèí í áí ñî áèáí í í ãî ñî òèàèúí í ãî ñèí ÿ í à Đòñè, à àèèþ -àèí ñü í áí í ñðááñðááí í í á ñè ñòàî ó èí ÿæãñèí ãî í èđòæáí èÿ è áí ÿðñèí é í àðđí í èì èè.

In Rus’ the clergy did not initially constitute an enclosed social stratum but was directly included in the system of princely entourage and *boyar* patronymy.²⁶

This state of affairs created an ideal breeding ground for the spread of practical writing. It was here that writing as a fundamental attribute of Christian culture met with the oral practices of everyday urban life.

The cultural phenomenon of birchbark letters was a result of this meeting. Therefore, it should be approached in a twofold perspective: as a communicative means of performing a certain pragmatic function, on the one hand, and as a piece of Cyrillic writing on the other.

²⁶ А.А. МУСИН, “Ñî òèàèúí ù á ãî ñî ãèòü è ñîí ðèè äðááí äðòññèí é Öãðèàè í í äáí í ù ï í í ãî ðí äñèè ò ááðáñðááí ù ò äðáà ï ò” [Social aspects of the ecclesiastical history of Old Rus’ in the light of the Novgorod birchbark documents], in: *Берестяные грамоты: 50 лет открытия и изучения* [The Birchbark Documents: 50 Years of Discovery and Research], ed. A.A. GIPPIUS et al. (Moscow, 2003), pp. 102-124, at pp. 122-123.

In pragmatic terms, birchbark letters display continuity with the tradition of oral messages, which in pre-Christian times were the only means of distant communication. With this tradition they share a common linguistic vehicle – East Slavic vernacular, but also some specific features of textual organisation.²⁷ In some cases we can assume that the message was supposed to be delivered in oral form, read aloud to its recipient. In particular, this seems to be the case with No. 771 (late thirteenth century):

ОИМИНА КАЖЕ ВЕСТЕ КЪ ТОВЕ: ГРѢНУ СЕРЬБРА ПРИСЛИ НА ДЪВКЕ

Olfimija (=Euthimia) sends a message to you: send me one silver grivna for the girl-slave ...

What is peculiar about this letter is that the addressee is not indicated by name. The probable explanation is that the text just fixes in a written form what the messenger of Olfimija had to say to the addressee. No less telling is the opening formula of the document from Staraja Russa No. 11 (second half of the eleventh century), presenting the written message as an oral speech:

ИВАНЛА МОЛОВИЛА ОИМЬ ЛЮБО КОУНЬ ВОСОЛИ ПА^к ЛИ ДОРГО ПРОДАЮ

Ivan's wife said to Fima: "send the money, or I will demand that a large fine is imposed on you".²⁸

Oral delivery of the message is likely to be responsible for the choice of grammatical forms referring to the author in document No. 422 (mid-twelfth century):

Ѡ МѢСТАТЬ КО ГАВОШЬ И

²⁷ For the detail treatment see A.A. GIPPIUS, "È ì ðàâî àðèêâ è êîîî óí èèàðèáí é î ðâáí èçàòèè áâðâñòÿí ù ò ãðàì î ò" [On the pragmatics and communicative organisation of birchbark documents], in: *Новгородские грамоты на бересте (из раскопок 1997-2000 гг.)*, pp. 183-232, at pp. 201-213.

²⁸ Amazingly, the opening formula of this document corresponds precisely to what is considered to have been the archaic Greek address form, reconstructed on the basis of the Persian letter adduced by Herodotes: "Amasis says to Polikrates:" (Herod. III 40). See Í . KOSKENNIEMI, *Studien zur Idee und Phraseologie des griechischen Briefes bis 400 n. Chr.* (Helsinki, 1956: *Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae*, Ser. B, t. 102), p. 156.

КО СОДННЬ ПОПЪИТАНТА МИ КО =
 НА Д МЪСТАТА СА ВАМА ПОКЛА =
 НА ДЖЕ ВА ЦЪТО НАДОБЪ Д СОЛИ =
 ТА КО МОНЪ Д ГРАМОТЪО ВОДАДИТА
 Д УО ПАВЛА СКОТА ПОПРОСИТА Д МЪСТА

From Mestiata to Gavsha and Sdila. Find me a horse. And Mestiata bows to you two (= sends his regards). If you are in need of something, then send to me a message and write a gramota. And ask for money from Pavel. And Mestiata (bows to you).

Here the distribution of the forms of first and third person denoting the author (Mestiata) corresponds to the division of the text into informative and etiquette parts. In the former the author is referred to in the first person, while in the latter the third person is used instead. Such a composition seems to reflect the point of view of a messenger: when rendering the sender's greetings to the addressee he mentions the sender as the third person, whereas when conveying the message itself he presents it as a sender's direct speech. This is not a mere supposition: Russian chronicles described the delivery of oral speeches by princely ambassadors in precisely the same way. See, for example, in the Laurentian Chronicle under the year 1176 regarding a message from the embassy of Prince Gleb Rostislavich to Mikhalko Jurjevich:

Οἱ δὲ οὗτοι εἶπον τῷ ἄρχοντι: “Ὁ βασιλεὺς ἡμῶν εἰσέειπεν αὐτοῖς: ἀκούετε ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ ἡμῶν, ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ ἡμῶν, ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ ἡμῶν, ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ ἡμῶν, ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ ἡμῶν, ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ ἡμῶν, ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ ἡμῶν, ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ ἡμῶν, ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ ἡμῶν, ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ ἡμῶν.”²⁹

And Gleb's ambassadors met him and they said: “Gleb bows [to you, saying]: I'm fully guilty, and now I will return everything I took from my brothers-in-law Mstislav and Jaropolk”.

In certain cases a birchbark letter obviously served to authorise a more detailed oral message, providing a kind of written sanction for it.³⁰ See, for example, No. 879 (mid-twelfth century):

²⁹ PSRL 1 (1997), p. 379.

³⁰ For this function of birchbark letters, see also D.M. BULANIN, “Der literarische Status der Novgoroder ‘Birkenrinden-Urkunden’”, *Zeitschrift für Slawistik* 42 (1997), pp. 146-167, at p. 159.

Ѡ жирѧть поклѧнѧнне ко радѧть водѧн семѸ еже рыкло вѣрышцю тѸ

A bow (=greetings) from Zhirjata to Radjata. Give to this (man) what he said – that grain.

On the other hand, as a piece of writing, the birchbark letter belongs to the periphery of Slavonic literary tradition founded by Sts Cyril and Methodius. Although in the hierarchy of literary genres comprising this tradition pragmatic birchbark writing occupied the lowest end, its concrete examples may or may not reveal the writers' orientation towards the higher levels of the hierarchy. The use of Cyrillic script for practical purposes left plenty of room for variation on different levels. Much depended here on the competence and literary ambitions of a scribe. Handwriting may be professional or that of an amateur; orthography may be the same as that of the church manuscripts or deviate from it (in particular, in the use of certain letters for vowels),³¹ and the language (phonetics and morphology) may be pure Old Novgorod dialect or its 'standardised' version, avoiding the most salient local features as non-prestigious. And last but not least, vocabulary and phraseology may or may not be influenced by Church Slavonic.

Church Slavonic influence is most noticeable in the opening and closing formulas, which constitute the etiquette 'frame' of a letter.³² During the pre-Mongol period, the set of opening formulas includes three standard expressions: 1) *отъ X къ Y* ("From X to Y"), 2) *Gramota отъ X къ Y* ("Letter from X to Y"), 3) *Poklanjanie отъ X къ Y* ("Greeting [literally: a bow] from X to Y"). Church Slavonic *gramota* is a loan from the Greek *ta grammata*. *Poklanjanie*

³¹ On the the so-called "everyday" orthography, see A.A. ZALIZNJAK, "Äðááí äðónñèäÿ äðàð èèà ñî ñî äø áí èèì ò – o è ò – e" [Old Russian Graphics with Interchange of ò – o and ò – e], in: ИД. *Русское именное словоизменение: С приложением избранных работ по современному русскому языку и общему языкознанию* [Russian Nominal Inflexion: With an Appendix of Selected Works on the Modern Russian Language and General Linguistics] (Moscow, 2002), pp. 577-612.

³² For the chronological distribution of the address formulas of birchbark letters, their genesis and semantic structure, see D. WORTH, "Incipits in the Novgorod birchbark letters", in: *Semiosis: Semiotics and the History of Culture (In Honorem Georgii Lotman)*, ed. M. HALLE *et al.* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1984), pp. 320-332; ZALIZNJAK, *Древненовгородский диалект*, pp. 36-37; A.A. GIPPIUS, "Í äáèþ äáí èÿ í ää ÿðèèáðí ù ì è ô î ðì öèàì è äáðñðÿí ù ö äðàì í ò" [Observations on the etiquette formulas in the Novgorod birchbark documents], in: *Стереотипы в языке, коммуникации и культуре: Сборник статей* [Stereotypes in the Language, Communication and Culture: A Collection of Articles], ed. M.A. KRONGAUZ *et al.* (Í î scow, 2009), pp. 274-295.

is a Church Slavonic word for ‘bow’, translating the Greek *proskynesis*; its counterpart in the closure of a letter can be either *poklanjajusja* (“I bow to you”) or *tseluju tja* (“I kiss you”) – the latter being of Church Slavonic origin as well.

Most intriguing, however, is the fact that neither *grammata* nor *proskynesis* are attested in the incipits of Byzantine letters; on the other hand, the standard Greek address form with the infinitive *khairain* left no traces in the Old Rus’ private letter writing. The incipits of birchbark letters should, therefore, be regarded as local inventions made by the first generation of their writers on the basis of the Church Slavonic literary tradition, with no direct influence from Byzantine epistolography. For the opening formula with the word *gramota*, the model might have been provided by the word *kъnigy*, ‘book’, which occurs in the titles of many Old Church Slavonic texts, including Tetraeuangelion (‘The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham’). To begin a letter (*gramota*) with the word *gramota* was just as natural as to begin a book with the word ‘book’.

The formulas with the words ‘bow’ and ‘kiss’ most likely originate in the monastic milieu. Close parallels can be found in the *Catechetical Homilies* of Theodore the Studite, some of which are written in epistolary form. Here we read for example:

Áðàðè à è í ððè! Òâëóþ ààñú è í ù í ð í àì è ñàì í ù ì ú í í èëàí áí è àì ú, âçþ áéáí àÿ ì í ÿ ÷ààà, è í í èëàí ÿþ ñÿ èí ì óæáí ààñú, óâëóþ è í áéí áú çàþ.³³

Brothers and fathers! Now again I greet you with a written bow, my beloved and desired children, and I bow to you all and kiss you.

Compare this with the twelfth-century birchbark letter (No. 682), which a nun of St Barbara’s Cloister wrote to her sister-nun:

+ ПОКЛАНАНИЕ ѿ ХАРИТАНИЕ КО СЪОНИ ЕЖЬ ТО [Т]И ЕСЬМЬ
 ПОСЪЛАЛА ꙗꙗ РЕЗАНЕ МИХАЛЪВИ НА ПОВОН ДА ЖЕ ТИ ВЪ=
 ДАЛЪ ДА МОЛЮ ТИ СА ГОСЪПОЖЕ КА МОА ДА ПОСЪЛЪ
 КО БОРОЖЬ И РЪВИЦЬ ВЪИДАЛЪ ТИ И ЦЕЛОВЮ ТА

³³ MS from the Russian State Library in Moscow (Moscow Theological Academy collection, No. 52, fourteenth century), fol. 116r.

Greetings (bow) from Kharitania to Sof'ia. Concerning the 3 rezanas I sent to Mikhal for the veil, then have him give (apparently, the veil). And I also ask you, my lady: have him rush in giving some salted (fish) and [fresh] fish. I kiss you [i.e., farewell].

Another early example of initial *poklanjanie* is found in a monk's letter as well (No. 605, late eleventh – early twelfth century). Yet in the mid-twelfth century we find the same combination of formulas, as in No. 682 in a purely secular document found in Torzhok (No. 10):

+ ѿ онѹѳрьѢ кѢ матери пошьлъ петръ
 кѢ тебѣ поемъ конь и матьль лъзар(ѣ) =
 въ а воротите конь и матьль а само =
 го послѣ сѣмо али не послешъ [а т]акѹ же
 ми вѣсть присли и покланяю ти са и цѣлюю та :

From Onufrij to mother. Petr went to you, having taken (with him) Lazar's horse and a coat. Return him the horse and the coat, and send him (Petr) here. If you don't send, send me a message. I bow to you and a greet you.

Ecclesiastical and monastic circles were thus not only the source of literacy, but also the legislators of epistolary etiquette. Standards of letter-writing first applied by clerics and monks were readily taken up by the literate laity, becoming widely accepted. This pattern of dissemination of formulaic expressions was not confined to the standard forms of address and salutation – sometimes it brought about more exquisite fruits. A love letter sent by an anonymous young lady to her sweetheart at the end of the eleventh century (No. 752, see figure 7) ends up with the following tirade:

ци ти воѹдоѹ задѣла своимъ възоумъемъ аже ми са поцьньши
 насмихати а соудитъ бѣ [и] моа хоудость

Even if I, by my own lack of thought, have offended you, if you will laugh at me, then God and my own nothingness (i.e., I) will judge (you).



Fig. 7. No. 752: female love letter (fragment). Photo by the EPOS” group; courtesy of V.L. Janin.

Moja khudost’ (a calque from Greek *euteleia*) is a self-humiliating formula well-known from the ecclesiastical literature of early Rus’, both translated and original.³⁴

The ecclesiastical impact on lay birchbark literacy is also clearly manifested by the sign of the cross at the beginning of fifty-four documents, of which only three are Church texts (Nos. 506, 560, 727) and only four are letters and notes definitely written by clerics. Symptomatically, from the remaining forty-seven documents, forty (i.e. 85 percent) are dated to the eleventh to early thirteenth century. The same chronological pattern underlies the distribution of the Church Slavonic forms of salutation: thirty-six out of thirty-nine documents with an initial *poklanjanie* (‘bow’) and all of the nine documents ending with *tseluju tja* (‘I kiss you’) are dated to the pre-Mongol period.

The overall tendency underlying these changes is easy to understand. During the first two centuries of its existence in Rus’, lay practical literacy, being a by-product of ecclesiastical culture, preserved closer ties with its originating milieu than in the subsequent period. Slavic letters were invented by Sts Cyril and Methodius to serve missionary purposes, and even when applied beyond the religious domain could still convey a Christian message, together with a purely pragmatic meaning of a text. It can be surmised that for the first generations who made notes and wrote letters on birchbark, the use of writing in everyday life, besides being a practical convenience, was at the same time a marker of Christian identity.³⁵ A cross at the beginning of a letter is the clearest indication of this attitude. It also comes out very vividly in a question that Kirik, a Novgorodian monk and priest (famous for writing the first Rus’ mathematical treatise), asked Bishop Niphont at some time in the second quarter of the twelfth century:

³⁴ See ZALIZNJAK, *Древненовгородский диалект*, pp. 36-37, 254.

³⁵ For this aspect of birchbark writing cf., with certain reservations, BULANIN, “Der literarische Status”; the author tends to deprive early birchbark literacy of any practical function, which is obviously an exaggeration.

Í ħñòù èè â òí ì ãðĥòà, àæá í í ãðàì í òàì òí àèèè í í ààì è, àæá èòí, èçðĥçàà,
í í ì á-âòù, à ñèí àà áóáóòù çí àèè?

Isn't it a sin, that we step with our feet on the *gramoty*, which people cut into pieces and throw away but the letters (or words) can be seen?³⁶

As inferred from the fact that birchbark letters still used to be cut and thrown to the ground, Kirik's concern was shared by few of his contemporaries, the others adhering to a less conservative view of pragmatic writing. Comparing these two attitudes, Remo Faccani speaks of the "emancipation" of pragmatic literacy steadily liberating itself from its "sacrality".³⁷ To a certain extent this process must have been conditioned by the broadening of the social base of secular writing. As Andrej A. Zaliznjak has shown, comparing the chronological distribution of birchbark documents with the dynamics of their orthography, in the twelfth century birchbark literacy ceased to be a prerogative of the elite and began to be mastered by wider circles of the urban population.³⁸ This entailed a vulgarisation of writing habits, established in the eleventh century; in particular, the outburst of 'everyday' orthography. The steady abandonment of Church Slavonic formulas of salutation, as well as of the initial cross, may well have been a consequence of the same trend.

Another factor to be taken into consideration when discussing the tendency in question is the dynamics of the Christianisation of Rus' society. People of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries who rarely started their letters with a cross were not less Christian, of course, than their ancestors: they simply did not feel the need to stress their Christianity on such occasions. With Christian faith long established in the society and writing having become a routine part of everyday life, the very use of it was no longer perceived as a form of expression of Christian identity, which it evidently had been for the "new Christian people, the elect of God", as the Russian Primary Chronicle calls the eleventh century Rus'.

³⁶ S. SMIRNOV, *Материалы для истории древнерусской покаянной дисциплины* [Materials for the History of Old Russian Penitential Discipline]: suppl. to S. SMIRNOV, *Древнерусский духовник* [Old Russian Confessor] (Moscow, 1914), pp. 153-154.

³⁷ R. FACCANI, "Í âèí òí ðú á ðàçì ù ø èáí èý í á èñòí èàð ãðááí áí í àá ðí àñèí é ì èñüí á-í í ì ñèè" [Some reflections on the sources of Old Novgorod writing], in: *Берестяные грамоты: 50 лет открытия и изучения*, pp. 224-234, at pp. 227-228.

³⁸ ZALIZNJAK, "Ãðááí ãðóññèâý ãðàð èèà", pp. 607-610.

The considerations presented in this paper may suggest an answer to the question touched upon several times during the Bergen conference: Why didn't people in Bryggen write their messages on birchbark? Or, vice versa: Why did people in Novgorod use birchbark instead of writing on wooden sticks? Obvious similarities between the two traditions of practical literacy make their difference in respect to writing material particularly striking. This discrepancy seems to be rooted in the different cultural backgrounds of Scandinavian runic and Slavonic Cyrillic writing. The former, from its very beginning, existed in the form of inscriptions on artefacts and hence exploited solid materials such as metal, stone or wood. Cyrillic script, on the contrary, was invented for the writing down of Christian texts, and its original medium was a leaf of parchment, either as a folio in a codex or as a roll. A roughly rectangular piece of birchbark may have been regarded as the equivalent of a parchment leaf. Thus, even in its external appearance birchbark literacy reveals its integral belonging to Christian culture, which evidently is not the case with the Bergen wooden sticks, which continued in a new form a tradition of runic writing going far back into pre-Christian times.