



'B-mails' from the Middle Ages

In North-West Russia, concentrated around the city of Novgorod, a lively exchange of correspondence on pieces of birchbark took place in the Middle Ages. More than a thousand of these 'b-mails' have now been photographed, further analysed and put on internet by a consortium of seven research institutes. Leiden University is secretary of the consortium. 'The messages are the equivalent of something between e-mail and sms,' explains Slavic scholar and 'berestologist', Professor Jos Schaeken. 'The length of the message which you can send is limited by the material itself.'

Stylus

Berestology is the new branch of science relating to texts on birchbark ('beresta' is the Russian word for birchbark). Schaeken shows a piece of dried birchbark which he himself cut from a dead birch tree. 'We don't know exactly how it was treated, but it isn't an intensive process. You have to wet it a bit and then it's easy to write on with a stylus. The letters were scratched into the bark without the use of ink. There are only two known examples with ink.' Birchbark was (and is) readily available in North-West Russia and so was an obvious candidate to be used for writing on. Paper had not yet been invented and parchment was much too expensive. And this material was already in common use for other purposes.'

Archaeological archive

The first fragment of inscribed birchbark was found on 26 July 1951 and since then more than a thousand examples have been unearthed. Every summer new excavations are made to find more samples. The pieces are on average no larger than 2 to 8 centimetres across. Only a quarter of them contain a complete text, the rest are more or less fragments. The complete texts generally contain no more than twenty words. A few have more than fifty words and the longest text is 176 words. Birchbark literacy originated in the second quarter of the 11th century and lasted until just after the middle of the 15th century. This is related to all kinds of historical developments and with the archaeological condition, whereby birchbark could no longer be included in the archaeological archive. Schaeken: 'This does not necessarily mean that it was not there, but that it didn't survive.'



Jos Schaeken: 'It's like having a thousand notes all saying: *'Hebban olla vogala nestas hagunnan (Have all the birds started their nests),'* laughs Schaeken. 'Frits van Oostrom would really be over the moon if something similar existed for Dutch.'



Novgorod, Nr. 549, late 12th century

An order to Grechin, painter of icons:

'Greetings from the Pope to Grechin. Paint me two six-winged angels on two icons, to be placed above the altar. I send you my regards. God will guarantee (the payment) or we will reach an agreement.'

Love letters

The birchbark texts give a unique first-hand insight into daily life in Novgorod over a period of more than four hundred years. Most of the documents are general correspondence, but lists of administrative information have also been unearthed. Apart from this, all conceivable types of documents have been found: official documents, such as wills or other forms of legal contracts; teaching materials, such as an alphabetical list or syllable exercises; puzzles, schoolboy jokes, oaths, labels, love letters, pieces of literature and liturgical texts, marriage proposals, invitations. 'There are quite a number of birchbark texts which we don't understand, but each new discovery adds to our knowledge,' comments Schaeken. 'These are short texts without any context. The writer assumes that the reader understands what is meant without everything having to be explained.'

Women

As well as their cultural-historical value, the texts are also of inestimable linguistic value. 'The birchbark texts have demonstrated that the differences between liturgical language and vernacular Russian are much greater than we realised,' explains Schaeken. 'We were used to Church Slavonic written in a language imported from Bulgaria. But a completely different kind of Russian was spoken in Novgorod than in the south. Expressions have emerged which we at first thought were mistakes. The assumption was that these people were not educated enough to write their language well or correctly. But these variations can be explained in historical-linguistic terms.' A further surprise was that literacy formed a considerable part of society and that a number of texts were written by women. 'Initially, it was assumed that everyone was able to read and write in that period. The Soviets thought this was fantastic, of course, but after a thousand or so letters, we now realise that it was primarily the highest level of society and the level just below that which was literate,' is Schaeken's more reasoned explanation.

Seventh Framework Programme

For three years excavations have taken place every summer funded by INTAS, an EU organisation, specifically intended to promote cooperation between East and West. In addition, the subsidy is used to set up an online [corpus](#). A small Moscow-based company has photographed all the texts from three sides, in order to be able to make the images as legible as possible. Schaeken: 'These are files of some 30 megabytes each.' The website was launched in Russia at the end of January, and was the subject of considerable media attention. Schaeken's primary concern is to attract new funds. He has in mind the EU's 'Seventh Framework Programme'. He would



Novgorod, Nr. 9, 2nd half of the 12th century

Gostjata calls for help from Vasil to regain the dowry from her ex-betrothed, who is now married to someone else:
Van Gostjata to Vasil: 'What my father and my relations gave me is in his hands. He is now married to another woman and refuses to give me anything. After his engagement to this other woman he sent me away and took the other woman as his wife. Please come here and do what you can to help me.'

like to use funds from this programme to make the project more international by linking it with other corpora in the West and turning it into a typological project: *Ego documents from the Middle Ages*. To do this, everything first has to be translated into English. In Bergen in Norway there is a corpus of runic texts, scratched onto wooden sticks, which dates from the same period, but this is much more limited. 'It's like having a thousand notes all saying: *'Hebban olla vogala nestas hagunnan (Have all the birds started their nests),'* laughs Schaeken. 'Frits van Oostrom would really be over the moon if something similar existed for Dutch.' All the introductions will shortly be available in English, but the texts themselves have to be translated by a birchbark specialist who is a native speaker of English, in order to be able to make sure none of the subtleties are lost.

(6 February 2007/SH)

Links

- An intensive masterclass in Berestology will be given during the [Leiden Summer Schools in Indo-European, Indology and Russian](#) from 30 July to 10 August
- [Novgorod birchbark texts online](#)
- [More information on Jos Schaeken](#)
- [Background information on birchbark texts](#)