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Study in the Humanities and Social
Sciences

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Academy of Arts and Sciences

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Contributions and comments can
be sent to the editorial committee,
attn. Kathy van Vliet-Leigh.

Editorial

In the Fall of last year an international committee, chaired by Professor Dik Wolfson, visited NIAS for a peer review. The visit was part of a five-yearly quality-assessment scheme that the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences has instigated for all of its research institutes.

The committee's report was published earlier this year and the outcome is encouraging. The concluding lines of the executive summary read: "The committee is impressed by the performance of NIAS in the international scientific community and its contribution to the international recognition of Dutch Scholarship in the humanities and social sciences. The institute is unique in the Netherlands and accordingly deserves to be cherished".

However, there is more to say. The report also contains 23 recommendations, dealing with all sorts of aspects, ranging from enhancing the visibility of the output and outcome of the various research activities, to widening co-operation with disciplines outside the humanities and social sciences, and from adopting an active policy vis-à-vis post-docs to improving the conditions of the Fellows' accommodations. In close consultation with the Board of the Academy, the NIAS Directorate has set to work with devising a strategy to deal with these various issues.

An interesting and challenging recommendation is the request to draw up a clearly identifiable mission

Çigdem Kağıtçıbaşı will give the 19th Uhlenbeck Lecture, entitled *Culture, Self and Human Competence: Developmental Perspectives*, at this year's NFA Day on 15 June 2001.

family system came to be seen as intolerably oppressive, but were still mostly excluded from the political domain. The new women writers portrayed the impact of change on domestic and private life, but many critics regarded their works as obsessed with trivia. Male participation in the love-letter genre gave new status and wider circulation to frankly personal writing.

Writers evidently enjoyed the celebrity status and financial rewards that came from self-exposure. Like the film stars whose lives became marketable gossip, these writers gained fame and profit at the expense of their private lives. Living beyond the restricting (and yet supportive) confines of traditional family life, these modern heroines and heroes took their inspiration and comfort from their fellow-writers and readers who lived – or longed to live – in defiance of convention.

Once past the initial pleasurable shock felt by writers and readers alike at daring acts of self-exposure, one set of letters came to appear very much like another, and even the most romantic couples were unable to maintain high productivity. Aware of competing demands on readers' attention from an increasing variety in literature and other forms of entertainment such as the cinema, writers also came to realise the limitations on epistolary techniques. But the decisive factor in bringing a close to autobiographical epistolary fiction and published love-letters was the deteriorating political situation in China starting from the mid 1930s. Subjective writing of all kinds declined as civil war and foreign invasion threatened individual as well as national survival. Few writers, men or women, were bold or dedicated enough to persist with narratives that placed private lives above political and national interests.

Private Correspondence on Birch-Bark

By Jos Schaeken

Jos Schaeken is Associate Professor of Slavic Linguistics at the University of Groningen. At NIAS, he is investigating the language of medieval Russian documents from the northwestern region on the basis of the insights gained from the study of birch-bark documents. Birch-bark documents are numbered according to the Academy edition (Novgorodskie gramoty na bereste [Novgorod documents on birch-bark]).

July 26, 1951, is an important date for all Slavists who study the language, history and culture of medieval Russia. On that day, archeologists discovered a text written with a sharp stylus on a small piece of bark of a birch tree in the ancient *Kholop'ia ulitsa*, the "Serfs" Street, in Novgorod. Now, half a century later, around one thousand

birch-bark texts have been excavated. Although the main part of the corpus was found in Novgorod, some eighty birch-bark documents have also been brought to the surface in other ancient Russian cities, including the northern settlements of Staraja Russa (south of Lake Ilmen), Smolensk, Pskov, Torzhok, Tver' and

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Lake Ilmen),
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Vitebsk. The large number of documents found in Novgorod can be explained by the fact that archaeological conditions happen to be favorable (perfect preservation of organic material in water-saturated soil; no deep foundations or extensive overbuilding after its post-medieval decline). It does not imply that writing on birch-bark was a local phenomenon, limited to this particular city.

The birch-bark documents give us a direct insight into every-day life in Novgorod between the middle of the eleventh and fifteenth century. The bulk of the texts consists of private letters from person(s) to person(s) dealing with the daily concerns of urban life: housekeeping, family affairs, legal matters, and, most of all, financial transactions and business in general. They were not only written by the upper echelons of society, but also by clergy, traders, craftsmen, peasants, soldiers, artists (icon-painters), etc. A typical example of the many letters involving money is no. 246 (1025-1055):

"From Zhirovit to Stoian. It is over eight years since you swore to me on the Cross, yet you do not send me the veveritsy [squirrel-skins, used as currency]. If you do not send me 4¹/₂ grivny [marten-skins], I shall confiscate your debt from a distinguished Novgorodian...".

Or take the case of letter no. 235 (1160-1180):

"From Sudisha to Nazhir. Zhadko sent two officials, and they plundered me for my brother's debt. But I am not Zhadko's guarantor [for my brother]. Prevent him from setting an officer on me ...".

Not all documents are correspondence, there are also a considerable number of lists itemizing debtors, dues and deliveries of goods, as well as memoranda and labels on which only the owner's name is stated. Other topics we found were drawings and writing exercises by a boy who lived in the

first half of the thirteenth century and who called himself Onfim (Figure 1). Judging by his skills, Onfim must have been around seven years old at the time he made his drawings and practiced the letters of the alphabet.

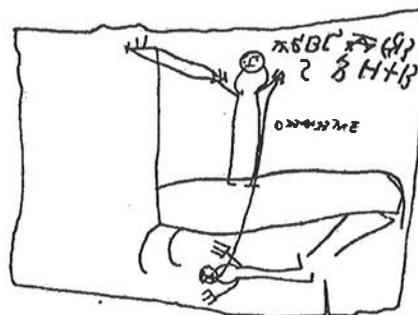


Figure 1: no. 200 (1220-1240)

What makes birch-bark documents important for the study of the language and culture of medieval Russia is that these documents form a unique collection. The vast body of other historical sources from the same period consists mainly of a variety of ecclesiastical genres, which only offer a narrow view on medieval society. Moreover, these were not written in the vernacular, but in Church Slavonic, a language that was imported from Bulgaria. From a philological point of view, the study of birch-bark documents can produce the kind of information, which in the case of Church Slavonic manuscripts, can usually be gained only on the basis of circumstantial evidence. First, we usually know where the documents were written from the place of excavation, the language and the contents. Most of the messages were exchanged within the city of Novgorod, although some letters were sent from outside, like for instance no. 424 (1100-1125):

"Letter from Giurgii to father and mother. Sell the house and come here to Smolensk, or to Kiev; bread is cheap .." (Figure 2)

parallels elsewhere, often makes it difficult to understand their precise contents.

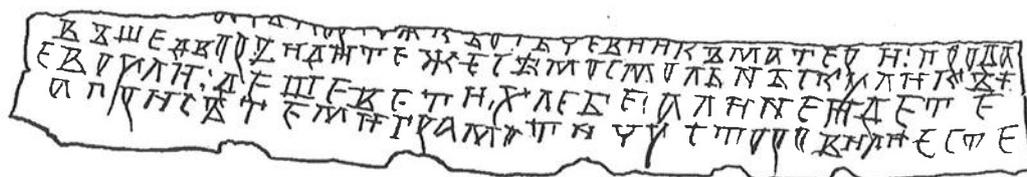


Figure 2: no. 424 (1100-1125)

or no. 43 (ca. 1400):

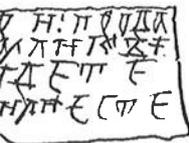
"From Boris to Nastasia. As soon as you receive this letter send me a man on horseback, since I have a lot to do here. And send a shirt, I forgot one"

which suggests that Boris is out of town. Second, birch-bark documents can be dated fairly accurately, mainly on the basis of the dendrochronology of the wooden planks with which the Novgorodian streets were paved. Because of the sodden ground and the layer of debris left by human activity, every two or three decades a new pavement had to be laid over the previous one. Third, birch-bark texts are first-hand autographs, whereas sources written in Church Slavonic are usually copies with multi-layered linguistic and textological data that cannot always be properly assessed. However, scholars who study birch-bark documents are also confronted with specific problems that arise from the nature of the corpus. The majority of the documents survived as fragments and an average text is no longer than twenty words (the longest text contains 166 words, i.e. roughly the same length as the first paragraph of the present paper). The shortness of the texts, in combination with the lack of a further context and the occurrence of unique lexical material and grammatical structures that have no

The study of the language of birch-bark documents has fundamentally advanced our knowledge of the early stages of Russian and the rise of the modern standard language. It turns out, that the set of northwestern dialects in the Novgorod and Pskov area differed in some fundamental respects from 'Standard Old Russian'. This can be explained by the fact that they were geographically marginal and spoken on a Finnic substratum. Also, we now have a clearer picture of the sociolinguistic situation in and around medieval Novgorod; the use of different varieties of Russian (next to Church Slavonic) and the spread of literacy. In the latter case it should be pointed out that there is no evidence for the widespread use of professional scribes. Although there are a few cases where letters from different persons are written in the same hand or in which the sender is addressed to in the third person, the overwhelming majority of them were written by the sender himself.

The huge number of styluses that have been unearthed also supports this conclusion. Thus, we can show that there was widespread literacy at different levels in society, not only among laymen, but also women. For instance, Nastasia, mentioned in no. 43 above, wrote a letter herself some years later (no. 49, ca. 1410):

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"Greetings from Nastasia to my brothers. My Boris is no longer among the living. How, my Lords, will you take care of me and my children?"

The longest birch-bark letter (no. 531, 1220-1250) was written by a woman, named Anna, who asks her brother Klimiata to take action in a dispute over a payment of debts in which a certain Kosniatin called Anna a whore and her daughter a slut. No less dramatic is letter no. 752 (1080-1100), the sender of which is a woman and the addressee a man:

"[I sent (?)] to you three times. What is it that you hold against me, that you did not come to see me this week? I regarded you as I would my own brother. Did I really offend you by that which I sent to you? I see you are displeased. If you had been pleased you would have torn yourself away from company and come to me ... Write to me ... If in my inconsiderateness I have offended you and you should spurn me, then God is my judge ...".

There is little doubt that this is a love-letter by a woman who in a delicate way expresses her personal feelings. Judging by certain literary expressions in the text, she was probably well educated and perhaps belonged to the upper strata of society. Private affairs can also be conveyed on birch-bark in a more direct way, as is shown in letter no. 377 (1267-1300):

"From Mikita to Anna. Marry me. I want you and you me. And as witness will be Ignato ...".

Because of the verb 'to want' one might think that this is another love-letter. However, there is good evidence that the Old Russian verb should not be understood in terms of intimate feelings but rather of a formal marriage proposal. Nevertheless, this document, as many other ones on birch-bark, vividly brings to life medieval Russian society in a way that no other historical sources are able to do.

Love Potions in Antiquity

By Manfred Horstmanshoff

Manfred Horstmanshoff, Associate Professor of Ancient History at Leiden University, is co-ordinator of the current NIAS theme group on "Rethinking the History of Medicine: 'Rationality' and 'Magic' in Babylonia and the Graeco-Roman World".

Love potions in Antiquity were essentially a matter of dosage. As blurred, as the dividing line was between the genuine physician and the well-meaning quack, as undefined was the difference between love potions and actual poisons. An illustration of this will reveal the magical world of evoking love and tempering desires in ancient medical practice.

The symptoms of love-sickness as described by Sappho are common to all

"...the whole thing has set the heart in my breast pounding: for the moment I look at you, then no longer am I able to speak, but my tongue has snapped and a fine flame just now has coursed under my skin, and with my eyes I see nothing, and my ears are buzzing, and cold sweat grips me, and trembling seizes all of me, and paler than grass am I, and on the very point of dying I seem to myself."

Sappho