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Old Russian Birchbark Letters

A Pragmatic Approach

This study is devoted to a corpus of Old Russian letters, written on pieces of birchbark. These unique texts from Novgorod and surroundings give us an exceptional impression of everyday life in medieval Russian society. The organic material has been preserved in the soil, and every year new birchbark letters tend to be unearthed during excavations in Novgorod.

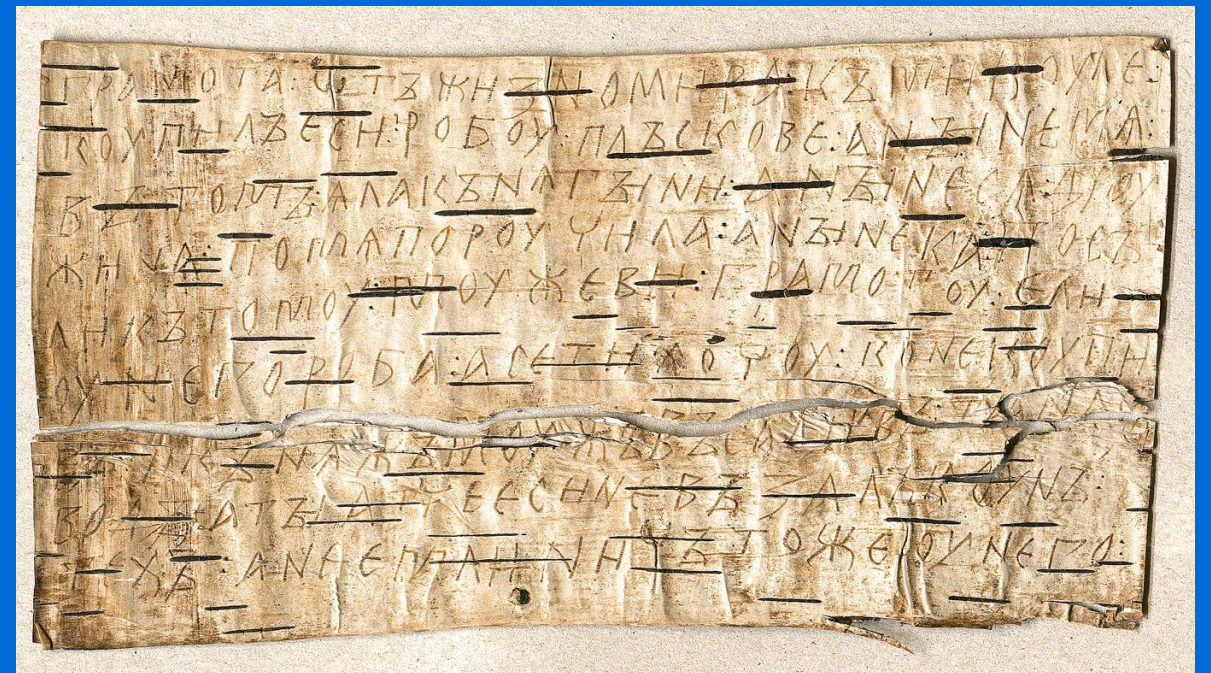
In this study, the birchbark letters are addressed from a pragmatic angle. A number of linguistic parameters are identified that shed light on the degree to which literacy had gained ground in the communicative processes of the time. It is demonstrated that the birchbark letters occupy an intermediate position between orality and literacy. On the one hand, old oral habits of communication persisted, and are reflected in the way in which the birchbark letters are phrased; they are characterized by a large degree of context-dependence. On the other hand, new literate modes of expression emerged, which can be seen in the development of normative conventions and fixed formulae.

The subject will be of interest not only to scholars of Russian, but also to a broader circle of linguists who work in the fields of corpus linguistics and historical pragmatics.

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