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CHAPTER 1

THE FIELD OF STUDY: BERESTOLOGY

1.1 Introduction

The excavation of birchbark letters (alongside a multitude of other historical artefacts) has been going on in Novgorod during many excavation seasons since 1951. These decades of discoveries have opened up an entire field of multi-faceted investigations. The whole academic field that studies the birchbark letters in all their aspects is called *berestology*, after the Russian word *beresta* ‘birchbark’. This field will be briefly introduced in the present chapter.

In the following sections, the birchbark letters will be positioned within their basic background. The discourse will be illustrated by means of several examples from the texts themselves, in order to provide a more lively picture by way of introduction. We shall deal with, respectively, the excavations of the birchbark letters (§1.2), their dating and chronology (§1.3), and the users and uses of the birchbark letters (§1.4). Finally, we discuss the language of the birchbark letters (§1.5) and mention their relation to other available sources (such as parchment documents) covering the same area and period (§1.6). Most of the mentioned facts can be found in Zaliznjak (DND: 15-21).

Before we proceed, I would like to mention that the Old Russian text of the birchbark letters, together with a modern Russian translation, photographs and drawings can be found on <http://gramoty.ru>. This website will be a valuable companion when reading the present study. To gain an impression of what a birchbark letter looks like, see Figure 1. Drawings are usually made to enhance the legibility for present-day researchers (Figure 2).



Figure 1: Photograph of N2 (1360-1380)

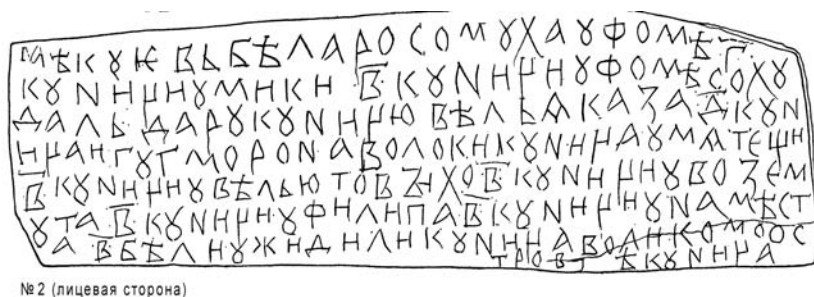


Figure 2: Drawing of N2 (1360-1380)

For a more detailed edition of the birchbark letters, I refer the reader to the official publication series *Novgorodskie gramoty na bereste* [Novgorod Documents on Birchbark; abbreviated as NGB], in which twelve volumes have appeared so far (1953-2015); the latest volume includes the birchbark letters up to and including the 2014 excavation season. All birchbark letters up to and including the excavation season of 2003 have also been included in Zaliznjak's (2004) reference work *Drevnenovgorodskij dialekt* [The Old Novgorodian Dialect; abbreviated as DND]. In addition, preliminary publications of each year's new findings appear in the journal *Voprosy jazykoznanija* [Issues in Linguistics]. The most recent article is by Gippius & Zaliznjak (2015). An electronic database was compiled by several Russian scholars in 2006, which comprises all birchbark letters up to and including N959. An updated and publicly accessible (although somewhat truncated) version of this database was made available online in 2014, as part of the Russian National Corpus (RNC; <http://ruscorpora.ru>).

1.2 Excavations

Birchbark letters are preserved in the soil. The craft of excavating is a thoroughly traditional and labour-intensive process: each handful of soil has to be

sifted attentively by human hands in order to find the smallest bits and parts. Most pieces of birchbark are found as little rolled-up cylinders, which need careful unfolding in order to be studied.

A place in the soil is an unusual way for documents to be preserved. The fact that a perishable substance like birchbark has managed to traverse the centuries in the first place is due to the favourable conditions of the soil. The organic material has been preserved in the marshy clay soil, which is not transparent to oxygen, so that the material does not decay. The birchbark letters have been found primarily in Novgorod, simply because most excavations have been conducted in Novgorod, whereas other medieval cities that might host numerous birchbark letters have been neglected, doubtlessly due to practical reasons and financial restrictions. But the large number of Novgorodian birchbark letters is also due to the important position that Novgorod occupied in the Middle Ages (cf. §1.4.2 below). Nevertheless, writing on birchbark is by no means a uniquely Novgorodian phenomenon, but was known in larger parts of medieval Russia, even though findings up to the present day may provide a distorted picture (cf. Figure 3 where each city and the number of findings as of 2015 are indicated).

It should be clarified at this point what we mean when speaking about birchbark letters. Not all of these are fully intact; some letters are severely damaged. Others are fragments that contain just a few signs. In yet other cases, fragments that were found separately turned out to be pieces of the same letter (thus, a letter can have several numbers; some fragments have been found even years after each other). So there are differences in the amount and degree of preservation of each birchbark letter, and thus also in their value and usefulness for research purposes. The birchbark sub-corpus mentioned in the previous section (RNC) comprises only those birchbark letters (up to and including N1015, i.e. the 2010 season) that contain sufficient text so as to be reasonably useful for research purposes, which makes up for a total of 885 birchbark letters containing 19,461 words.

Some birchbark letters are easily legible, others can hardly be deciphered and interpreted, or not at all. This is often a painstaking process, and over the years, several readings of birchbark letters had to be corrected and improved. The latest technical developments for providing detailed digital images have been helpful in enhancing the legibility and improving the reading process throughout.

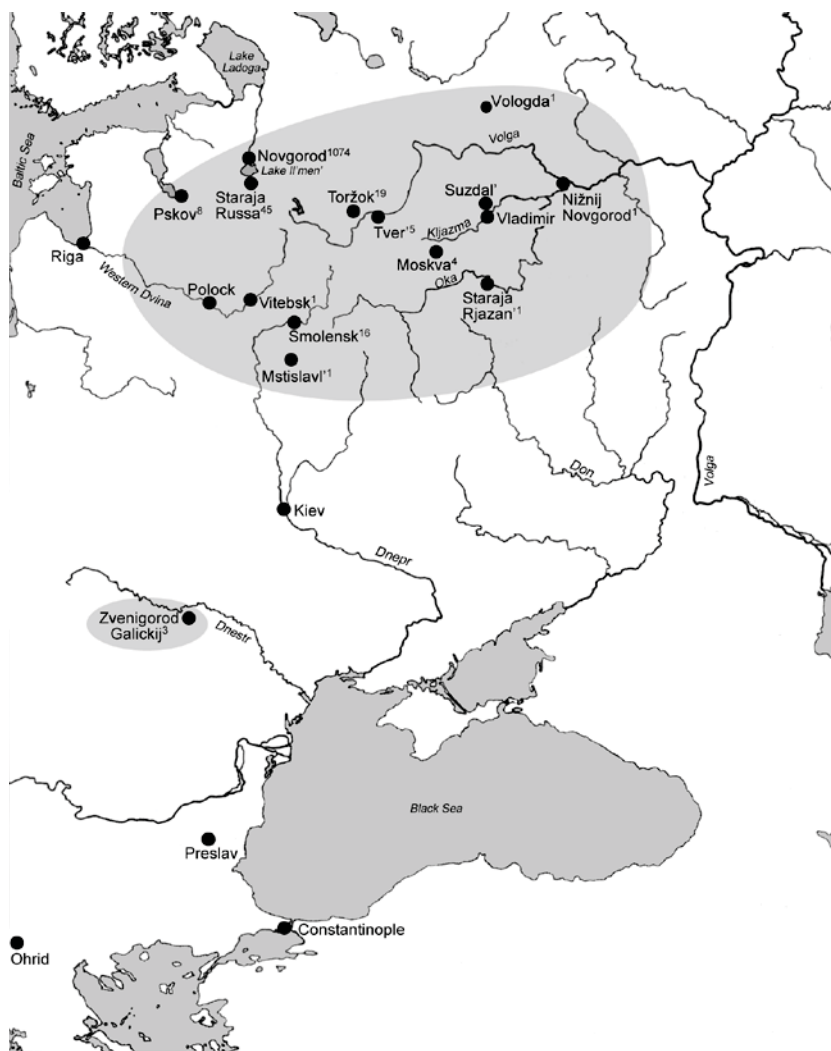


Figure 3: Finding places of birchbark letters (based on Schaeken 2012)

1.3 Dating and chronology

The chronological range of the birchbark letters runs from the early 11th to the late 15th century, which leaves us with over 400 years of birchbark attestations. Most birchbark letters have been dated fairly precisely, usually within a margin of 20 years, for instance 1200-1220. This dating process requires some explanation. The two main principles that are at work here are *stratigraphy* and *dendrochronology*. Stratigraphy concerns the successive layers of soil. Obviously, the excavations are conducted layer by layer. This already provides a

general timeframe, which is further specified by dendrochronology. By the latter method, patterns of annual rings are studied in pieces of wood that are encountered in the successive layers of soil. The most helpful sources in this respect are the layers of wooden logs that functioned as road pavement. Birchbark letters were often thrown away after use, ending up between the logs of the pavement. Throughout the years, as soon as the cultural layer augmented, new layers of logs were laid out on top of the previous ones. Thus, the birchbark letters that are found between these layers, or close by them, can be dated most precisely.

Only a small minority of birchbark letters cannot be dated in this way. For those cases, there are some other (extra-stratigraphic) methods. First of all, palaeography plays a role, as well as the study of spelling features, some of which changed over time. Then the letters' contents may provide clues. Formulaic language changed over time, most notably in the incipits (greeting formulae). Then there is information from external sources, such as chronicles. For instance, the name of a prince or other public official may be known to us from a Novgorodian chronicle, which is usually precisely dated. If the same person is mentioned in a certain birchbark letter, its time frame can thus be established. Nevertheless, the stratigraphic and dendrochronological method remains the most important way of dating the birchbark letters.

1.4 Users and uses of the birchbark letters

As was mentioned before, this study approaches the birchbark letters from a pragmatic angle. Taking into account that the field of pragmatics is primarily concerned with language use (see chapter 4), it is important to introduce the users and uses of the birchbark letters. In the following subsections, we shall first look at the text types and contents (§1.4.1), and then at the more general topic of literacy in Novgorod (§1.4.2). Thirdly, we shall briefly look ahead to the ways in which birchbark letters could function within a communicative event (§1.4.3). This latter topic will be further elaborated in the course of the study.

1.4.1 Text types and contents

What kinds of texts do we find on birchbark? The briefest answer is: all those texts that were not worth the expense of parchment. To be a bit more specific: most of them concern matters of everyday life, which includes topics connected to the family or household affairs, estate management, etc. But the vast majority of birchbark letters have to do with money in some way or another. The character of Novgorod as a significant trade centre led to written records about business, commerce, and debts, but we also encounter texts that deal with law and order, mainly in the area of tax collection. These are just a few catchwords, but throughout this study a lot of examples are presented, by

which the vast range of topics is amply illustrated. Connected to this is the question of genres. No formal classification has ever been proposed for this specific corpus, but in the course of this study we shall encounter a variety of text types and uses, such as personal letters, notes, contracts, wills, etc.

The majority of birchbark letters are very short; most of them count less than 20 words, though there are notable exceptions, up to 176 words (DND: 20). Most of the texts are (private) letters, where the author and addressee are mentioned in an incipit formula, such as the following (this is the whole letter):

- (1) Poklonъ ot Panfil k Mar--¹ i ko popu. Kupite masleca drevjanogo da prišlite simъ.
 ‘Greetings² from Panfil to Mark (?) and to the priest. Buy some lamp oil and send it over here.’
 (N173 / 1400-1410 / DND: 656)

Other texts on birchbark are notes for personal reference, sometimes even children’s writing practice, yet others are the outcome of mutual agreements that were entrusted to writing. But we shall encounter a more subtle variety of types of use, in which birchbark letters could perform various functions and be connected to persons in various ways. This variety leads to a difficulty about the designation of the texts from the birchbark corpus: they are often called ‘birchbark letters’, but quite a few of them are not letters in the strict sense of the term. ‘Birchbark documents’ would be another possible term, but it has a connotation of being connected to official or governmental chanceries, and there was no such chancery in Novgorod,³ so that the birchbark corpus contains only a limited amount of texts that can truly be called ‘official documents’.

The Novgorodians themselves referred to a text on birchbark as *gramota*, as becomes clear from the following letter:

¹ Here we see the consequence of even a little damage to the edge of the birchbark letter. In his translation, Zaliznjak reconstructs the name as Mark (DND: 656).

² Literally: ‘a bow’. In incipit formulae, several words can occur that denote the act of bowing down (*poklonъ*, *poklanjanie*, *čelobitъ*). I have taken the liberty to translate these somewhat less literally, as they had become fixed formulae that did not necessarily have anything to do with bowing down.

³ At least, not in the usual sense of the term. What may come closest is the so-called ‘Petrok circle’. Petrok (Petr Mixalkovič) was a high-ranking state official (boyar) who was active between, roughly, 1125 and 1175. He sent and received a large number of birchbark letters (17 are known to us at present, cf. DND: 313, Schaecken 2012: 162).

- (2) Ot Borisa ko Nostasii. Kako pride sja gramota, tako prišli mi colověkъ na žerepcě, zane mi zděse dělъ mnogo. Da prišli sorocicju; sorocicě za-
byle.
'From Boris to Nastas'ja. As soon as this letter arrives, send me a man on a stallion, because I have a lot of work here. And send a shirt; I forgot a shirt.'
(N43 / 1380-1400 / DND: 651)

Gramota is a loanword from Greek (*grammata* 'letters' in the sense of 'characters, signs of the alphabet').⁴ But how do we translate it? Letter, document, text? The word *gramota* combines all these meanings. The word is still used in modern Russian, but in the more restricted meaning of 'document, diploma'. Nevertheless, it is also retained for referring to the birchbark letters (*berest-janye gramoty*).

As far as English is concerned, the term 'birchbark texts' would seem to be most appropriate, as it is most neutral about the contents and use of the inscriptions on birchbark. Nevertheless, the term 'birchbark letters' is so widespread by now, that both terms 'birchbark texts' and 'birchbark letters' will be used interchangeably throughout this study; this is not meant as an explicit statement about the nature or genre of the texts. Most of the birchbark letters that will be dealt with in the rest of this study will be 'letters' in the strict sense of the term, anyway. But as we shall see, the use of 'letters' in medieval Novgorod could differ tremendously from the present-day use of letters, especially due to an oral component.

1.4.2 Literacy in Novgorod

Among Soviet scholars, the consensus was that the vast majority of people in medieval Novgorod could read and write. In this view, medieval Novgorod was treated like an example of an egalitarian, communist society *avant la lettre*. The presence of many down-to-earth birchbark scribbles about everyday life might indeed easily lead to the assumption that almost everyone could read and write. However, in a medieval context, this is by no means a safe conclusion. How many people could actually read and write? There is only circumstantial evidence, and elements such as dictation and the use of scribes should be taken into account. Although the excavation of a great many (wooden or bone) styli does point to a widespread habit of writing, it should nevertheless be maintained contra the Soviet consensus that not everyone was

⁴ In a more general sense, words like 'message' or 'word' could be used to refer to a birchbark letter (the question remains whether these terms really referred to the birchbark letters themselves, or rather to an accompanying oral message that was delivered by a messenger; see §1.4.3 below, and chapter 2). The word *gramota* was used in a standardized incipit formula in the early birchbark period (12th century, see DND: 37): *gramota ot X-a ko Y-u* 'letter from X to Y'.

literate. Nor was it, on the other hand, only the clergy and a small upper class. The truth will be somewhere in the middle, also depending on the exact period under consideration. According to Franklin (1985: 15; 2002: 39), in the 11th and 12th centuries it was first and foremost the upper strata of Novgorodian society that were literate. In subsequent centuries literacy spread much more widely, including the lower levels of the urban population and to some extent peasants in the countryside.

We should bear in mind that “[t]he tendency to see a society (or individual) as either literate or oral is over-simple and misleading” (Thomas 1992: 4). In addition, we should be aware that the basic concept of literacy cannot be equated to present-day Western literacy (Ibid.: 20). So we cannot speak about Novgorodian society as literate in its entirety. Literacy was rather a characteristic of individual persons, who by their mutual use of writing developed a literate culture which functioned within the broader confines of Novgorodian society. A more theoretical discussion of what ‘literate’ and ‘literacy’ is taken to mean in the present study will be presented in chapter 4. For the time being, in this chapter, ‘literate’ will be taken in its common-sense meaning as ‘able to read and write’.

Gippius (2012) devotes an article to the question when and how writing was introduced in Novgorod and to what extent this development was intertwined with the introduction of Christianity. His conclusion is that there was no real use of writing in pre-Christian Novgorod, and that the birchbark letters should be seen as “belonging to Christian culture” (2012: 250). The oldest traces of literacy in Novgorod are religious texts (most notably a wax-tablet with Psalm texts, known as the Novgorod Codex, dated around the year 1000). It is only after 1030 that everyday pragmatic literacy on birchbark appears, after Jaroslav the Wise ordered the education of 300 children from the ranks of the nobility:

“сѣбра от старостѣ і от попov дѣти 300 učiti knigamju. I prestavisja arxiepis kop Akimъ; i bjaše učenikъ ego Efremъ, iže ny učaše.”

‘[Jaroslav] 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’ (entry from the Novgorod-Sofia group of Russian chronicles, quotation and translation from Gippius 2012: 236).

This is usually seen as the beginning of practical literacy in Novgorod (cf. Gippius 2012: 236). The general picture is, then, that writing first served religious purposes, and after that it spread into other spheres of life. As to its origins, pragmatic literacy in Novgorod was a “spontaneous by-product” (Ibid.: 237) of ecclesiastical literacy.

The further development and spread of literacy in Novgorod can be seen in the context of the city becoming the centre of a vast empire. The Volxov river,

which runs through the city, served as a life line; trade routes extended in all directions. An indicator for the extent of trade links with Western Europe is that the Hanseatic league had an office (*kontor*) in Novgorod. Especially in the later birchbark period (the 14th and 15th centuries), an enormous territory in the North-East fell under the dominion of Novgorod. Landlords sent their tax collectors to this hinterland, in order to employ the vast natural resources by extracting income from the local population. Many transactions of this kind can be traced on birchbark.

The demise of birchbark literacy set in in the 15th century. This was to a large extent due to political reasons. The fatal blow was the fall of Novgorod in 1478, which boiled down to a takeover by Moscow. Novgorod degenerated into a provincial town of marginal importance. A further, more prosaic reason why we do not have any birchbark letters from later periods is the introduction of a sewage system in the 17th and 18th centuries, which caused all organic material in the layers from the 16th century onwards to decay. Even if birchbark letters were written after the 15th century, they simply have not come down to us. But due to the emergence of paper, any significant role of birchbark as a writing material is improbable, anyway.

Much work on orality and literacy in the Western European Middle Ages is oriented towards administrative (chancery) literacy. Clanchy (1979/2012) is a well-known example of this kind of research (cf. the title *From Memory to Written Record*). He provides a historian's view on the role of the London chancery in promoting administrative literacy in England. This concerns a different kind of literacy, which hardly existed in Novgorod or medieval Rus' in general. When referring to Franklin (2002), Clanchy (1979/2012: 342) acknowledges the difference between the English and Russian medieval context: "In the Russian lands written forms of the vernacular were used by both clergy and laity and the emphasis on the agency of central government (as in Anglo-Norman England) was much less." But the absence of a chancery is not the only difference. There is one element that distinguishes all analyses of Western European medieval literacy from that in medieval Russia, viz. the presence and use of Latin. The use of Old Church Slavonic in medieval Russia (cf. §1.5) may be similar to the use of Latin in medieval Western Europe, but a significant difference is that Old Church Slavonic and Old Russian or Novgorodian were so closely related that the difference in use could be seen as scalar, rather than as a stark contrast between Latin and, for instance, a Germanic vernacular. This is an important point that comes between most accounts of medieval literacy and their application to medieval Novgorod.

1.4.3 The use of birchbark letters within the communicative event

In the Preface, I already hinted at the significance of the communicative event as a whole and its relation to the letter's contents. This is a topic that will call

for more extensive attention later on in this study. One aspect of the use of birchbark letters can be introduced at this point already. As I said, many of the birchbark letters are letters in the strict sense of the term, addressed from A to B. But then the next question is how the delivery of letters took place. There was no postal system, as far as we know, but the letters must somehow have reached the addressees. The concept of a *messenger*, who delivered the letter to the addressee, will be a central concern to our study. There must have been messengers who just brought a letter from A to B, but we shall also encounter examples which show that the messenger was not just a letter-bearer, but also an active participant in the communicative process, who could elaborate on the message orally, and present the letter as written evidence for his mission. This is a crucial consideration for the rest of this study. More about this extensive function of the messenger will be said in chapter 2, in connection with the introduction of the background for the present study.

1.5 The language: Old Novgorodian

A most thorough description of the language (Old Novgorodian) in which the birchbark texts are written has been given by Zaliznjak (2004). The title of his book (*Drevnenovgorodskij dialekt* ‘The Old Novgorodian dialect’) creates the impression that it is a reference grammar. This is very true for the first part, which contains a detailed description of the phonology, morphology, semantics and syntax of Old Novgorodian. The main bulk of the book consists of an edition of the birchbark letters (up to the excavation season of 2003), complete with translations into Modern Russian, as well as commentaries and observations about orthographical and grammatical peculiarities encountered in each letter. This makes that the scope of the book reaches far beyond that of a reference grammar.

But let us take a step back and turn to a more basic positioning of the language. Old Novgorodian is a Slavic language. The modern Slavic languages are divided into an Eastern, Southern and Western branch. Present-day Russian (along with Belorussian and Ukrainian) belongs to the Eastern branch. Now, to determine what the relationship is between Old Novgorodian and Contemporary Standard Russian, we need to sketch the medieval sociolinguistic situation in some more detail. The church used a South Slavic variety, Church Slavonic, as the language of liturgy and religious writing. At the other end of the spectrum there is the local dialect, Old Novgorodian. Then there is a third idiom, which is based on the dialect of Kiev, which functioned as a vehicle of communication between the various regional centres of trade (Kiev, Novgorod, Suzdal, etc.). Zaliznjak (DND: 5) calls this “supra-dialectal Old Russian”.⁵

⁵ Literally “наддиалектная форма древнерусского языка” ‘the supra-dialectal form of the Old Russian language’. The term ‘Standard Old Russian’, which is sometimes used, is an anachro-

These are all Slavic language varieties; it is unclear to what extent medieval Novgorodians would have thought of them as distinct languages, or just as distinct registers of the same language, as they would have been acquainted with all three to some extent.

Some attempts have been made to classify Old Novgorodian as a separate Northern branch of the Slavic languages. The mainstream view is still that it is an East Slavic variety, though it has some significant deviations from the ‘supra-regional’ variety of Old Russian which emanated from Kiev.

As may be expected for a medieval vernacular, nothing about the language is standardized in the present-day sense of the word. The spelling is especially versatile and prone to variation. This variation comes in addition to the phonological and morphological distinctions between Old Novgorodian and supra-dialectal Old Russian, which makes the system especially diversified and provides us with a rich blend of unexpected variants.

At the present stage of research, we have a pretty clear picture about Novgorodian dialectal features, mainly thanks to Zaliznjak (DND). Thus, the formal and grammatical aspects of the Old Novgorodian ‘dialect’ have been described in great detail. These will not be gone into at present (even though most of the literature on this topic is available in Russian only). Our task is to analyse language *use*: the pragmatics of Old Novgorodian (see chapter 2).

The sociolinguistic implications of the use of the Novgorodian dialect as opposed to supra-regional Old Russian and Church Slavonic have been discussed to some extent, e.g. by Vermeer (1997) and Schaeken (2011b). Some medieval writers on birchbark were well aware of the distinction and the implications for the social hierarchy and the circle in which the text was meant to function. The use of Church Slavonic was restricted to religious texts (though some elements of Church Slavonic influence can also be found in secular writing, such as birchbark letters written by monks, etc.). The division of labour between Old Novgorodian and supra-regional Old Russian is more subtle.

1.6 Other sources: Parchment documents

Birchbark letters are not the only texts that have come down to us from medieval Novgorod. Apart from parchment documents such as political treaties, business contracts, depositions, grants, etc., there were also religious texts and

nism (cf. Vermeer 1997 contra Zaliznjak 1995). In the Preface to the second edition of DND, Zaliznjak (DND: 3) replies that Vermeer’s criticism is the result of a misunderstanding, due to inference from English (the Russian word *standartnyj* does not mean ‘standard’ in the sense of ‘normative’, but was rather meant as ‘common, i.e. devoid of individual dialectal features’); nevertheless, Zaliznjak changes the term from ‘standard’ to ‘supra-dialectal’ in the second edition of DND (2004).

chronicles, but these latter are so different from the birchbark letters (in terms of contents and register) that they hardly need to be mentioned here. Such sources have not been used in the research for this study. The parchment documents from Novgorod and Pskov, known as GVNP (*Gramoty Velikogo Novgoroda i Pskova*), have been used as an additional source of linguistic data; they have not been investigated systematically, but are sometimes quoted by way of illustration, or to highlight a contrast with the birchbark letters.

The birchbark letters differ from the parchment documents in several respects. Most importantly, the aims and functions were different. Parchment documents were meant to be preserved as records of all kinds of transactions. Birchbark letters were ephemeral, meant for the business of the day, and to be discarded afterwards. It can also be that a birchbark letter served as a first draft for a parchment letter, such as a will or grant. We find an indication for this at the end of a long letter (one of the longest known birchbark letters, 16 lines on two sides of the birchbark):

- (3) [...] A ty, Stepane, рѣꙗꙑesavo на харотитију, поꙗꙑи љъ.
 ‘[...] And you, Stepan, having copied [this] onto parchment, send [it] away.’
 (N831 / 1140-1160 / DND: 303)

Apart from the parchment documents, there are some other sources of everyday writing. These include inscriptions on domestic objects and utensils, notes in the margin of books, and, most importantly, inscriptions on church walls.⁶ These sources, though fascinating, fall outside the scope of the present study.

1.7 Concluding remarks

There are various reasons why the Novgorod birchbark letters are especially significant for the field of Slavic studies. The fairly long timeframe of birchbark literacy provides an exceptional potential to study linguistic features diachronically. For the early period (especially the 11th century), hardly any other sources are available at all, both as regards the language (Old Novgorodian) and the sphere of use (everyday life) of the birchbark letters.

The importance of the birchbark letters also stretches beyond the Slavic area. If we compare the available sources of medieval European everyday writing, the results are quite meagre. The only corpus that comes close are the rune

⁶ Inscriptions on church walls are often written in a form heavily influenced by Church Slavonic. Especially in 2014, quite a few new inscriptions were found on fragments of the walls of the Georgievskij sobor in Jur'ev monastery near Novgorod. A significant number of inscriptions have also been found in the Sofijskij sobor in the Novgorod Kremlin.

sticks from Bergen, Norway.⁷ Notwithstanding, apart from the field of Slavic philology, the birchbark letters are hardly known and appreciated in broader circles of linguists or historians. This is unfortunate, and mostly due to the inaccessibility of Russian-language publications for a wider international audience. Nevertheless, the wealth and unicity of the material would justify a thorough consideration. It is hoped that the present study will add to this awareness.

⁷ There are, to be sure, some other corpora from earlier periods and different areas, such as the Vindolanda tablets from Roman Britain, papyri from Hellenistic Egypt, and even clay tablets from Ancient Babylonia; these are also instances of everyday writing. However, it is not my intention to establish their degree of similarity to the birchbark letters in this study.

