

## Abstract

For a long time, the Old Novgorodian dialect has been a subject of speculation regarding its genealogical position and linguistic features, the myths surrounding which this paper aims to dispel. As new birch bark manuscripts continue to be found, this problem remains more relevant than ever. By using the freshly gathered data we re-establish what we know to be true and make an educated guess about what is yet to be proven right. The findings exhibited here will be able to serve as a baseline reference point for the future researchers.

## Blogpost

What are the birch bark manuscripts and why are they important?

Throughout the entire human history, humans have used different materials to write on — stone, wood, leather, and many others, including birch bark. Manuscripts written on this incredibly fragile material (and dating all the way back to the 12th century!) have been preserved surprisingly well in the swampy lands of Novgorod, a city in Russia. Every year linguists and archaeologists venture out there and find even more birch bark writings; by now, over a thousand have been found in Novgorod alone! Saved by the city's climate, these manuscripts give us a unique opportunity to gaze into what life must've been long before us. Business deals, land purchases, even love letters — all of these manuscripts allow us to reconstruct the language of the old and add to our understanding of the linguistic quirks of the region. In this article, we will further delve into the history of the birch bark manuscript discovery and see what new knowledge we can derive from it.

Before we begin, we would like to ask you, the reader, to indulge in a bit of an imaginative play. Try to picture yourself as a commoner living in Veliky Novgorod somewhere around the XII century. Let's say your spouse is going on a month-long trip to the next big city soon, and you want them to buy something there and bring it home for you. What is it? Clothes? Toys for your kids? Or maybe, if you're a merchant, some goods that nobody in Novgorod has seen before, and will surely make your business the most popular in your town square? Whatever it is, traveling takes time, and memory is not the man's most reliable friend. You will need to take note of what you want your partner to buy, which means you will have to write it down somewhere.

But wait! Remember, it's still the XII century. Unless you're ultra rich, which you're not, you won't have the access to parchment, and paper isn't widely available yet either. There are also no BIC pens or plain ink lying around, which complicates your life even further. So far, not so good, and we haven't even contemplated the most important question... Do you even *know* how to write?

This is where the birch bark manuscripts come in. Standing tall and proud in all their wrinkled glory, they give us a chance to answer not all, but likely most questions that arose in your head during our little thought experiment. First of all, why are we so focused on Veliky Novgorod to start with? Surely, there were other archeological sites where the manuscripts were found? How come these specific ones are so unique?

To answer that question, yes and no. While it is indeed true that there were plenty of other birch bark manuscript findings, their numbers pale in comparison to the sheer amount of evidence that waited for centuries in the soft, humid soil of Veliky Novgorod. It just so happened to be that the most plentiful search site was also located exactly where one of the most mysterious dialects used to reign. Birch bark, which was used as a cheap and quick replacement for any other writing material, turned out to be surprisingly adept at lying dormant in the Novgorod's soil microclimate without losing any of its qualities.

Okay, we've figured out what we would write down that shopping list on. But what would we write *with*, since we can't access any of the solutions that pop into our head? While there were some manuscripts with actual ink on it found around the XV century, which was close to the decline of the birch bark era, most of them didn't involve any ink or any liquid/paste that could serve as ink whatsoever. The writing process was performed with a thin elongated piece of wood or metal that would make dents in the bark; essentially, words would be scraped on, which explains the blocky letter shapes we can see on the scanned manuscripts.

The question as to whether the general population of Veliky Novgorod was more literate than in any other place remains open; it could be attributed to the fact that there simply less findings in other regions which spoke East Slavic languages, hence less information about them, which does not necessarily imply the lessened literacy levels. What we can say for sure is that *plenty* of people, who were not part of the nobility, did have a good knowledge of the written language.

Let's go back to our merchant scenario. Suppose that all went well and your spouse was able to return home safely, having bought everything that you've asked them for. What do you do with the manuscript now? Some people would throw them into a fireplace, which is what you do, but what if someone else doesn't have access to one? In that case, people would simply throw it on the ground - shredded with scissors beforehand, so that no one else would be able to read what was written.

What we've covered so far is a very specific course of events, one of the many that the linguists were able to decipher from all the manuscripts found. Countless other manuscripts not only depict various scenes from daily life back then, but also aid our knowledge of the historical events that took place, such as battles, for example. The manuscripts existing in the first place is how researchers were able to trace people's lineages, or how we now have one of the first ever written mentions of Moscow, back when its secondary name, Kuchkov, was still in use.

But what exactly is it about the dialect used in these manuscripts that sets it apart from the others? One of the main defining qualities is that the evidence we have on our hands allows us to conclude that the Novgorodian dialect was almost entirely free from the Church Slavonic influence, which is not true for any of the other East Slavic dialects back then. Another interesting fact is that for a few decades (roughly since the 1951, the date of the discovery of the first birch bark manuscript that was not lost, up until the 80s) it was presumed that any deviations from the Old East Slavic language were simply a result of the manuscript's writer's low literacy level; however, everything changed when Andrey Zaliznyak stepped in.

Andrey Zaliznyak was a Russian linguist who specialized in historical linguistics. He was the one who first proposed the idea that the texts in the manuscripts were not, in fact, grammatically incorrect, but rather written in a dialect that hadn't been researched well up until that point. Sure enough, the orthography system described by him based on the archeological findings, also known as the *common graphic system*, showed that the majority of the texts were actually quite consistent in spelling. Letters in the following pairs: ъ/о, ъ/е and е/ѣ — were often exchanged, which was previously considered to be a mistake. Zaliznyak, however, managed to prove that this was not true. While these specific pairs did not represent any actual differences in pronunciation, similar exchanges happened with ц/ч and ѣ/и; the phonemes represented by these letters were actually almost indistinguishable in the Old Novgorodian.

Something that we also consider important to mention is that plenty of vocabulary used in the birch bark manuscripts was never found in any other text of that time, which often complicates the task of deciphering what's written. While all dialects have lexicons specific to them, the Old Novgorodian stands out specifically because a lot of the vocabulary pertained to people's everyday lives which would make it unlikely to appear in any highbrow textual documentations. Some meanings are still totally lost on us because we simply do not have enough evidence to make a decisive claim.

It is not hard to guess by now why exactly the Old Novgorodian dialect is still under a lot of debate. There are still a lot of disputes about where the language stands genealogically, and many people claim that it actually was not a branch of Old East Slavic, but rather a whole different branch that separated during the Proto-Slavic stage that later converged closer to other East Slavic dialects. Plenty of linguists go as far as to stipulate that were it not for Muscovy conquering the Novgorod Republic in 1478, the Old Novgorodian would have evolved into a whole separate language.

On this note we would like to conclude this article. We hope that you, the reader, have enjoyed our brief venture into the Old Novgorodian dialect, and gained some knowledge you weren't previously familiar with.