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**Article**

# The Novgorod Birch-bark Manuscripts

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## Abstract

The Novgorod birch-bark manuscripts (берестяная грамота, *berestjanaja gramota* or only *gramota*), pieces of birch bark with short messages, are typically dealing with issues of everyday life in mediaeval Russia. They have fascinated historians, archaeologists and, most notably, linguists ever since the first birch-bark writing was found in 1951.[1] We now have 1,200 documents of this kind, which were unearthed in several cities in Russia, mostly in the Novgorod area (Fig. 1).[2]

Due to their contents, function and linguistic features, the manuscripts constitute a unique corpus of documents showing Russian mediaeval literacy.[3] They contain valuable information on daily life in mediaeval Novgorod, the social structure of Novgorod's society, trade relations, private relations, the city administration and so on. They have also proven to be an extraordinarily valuable source of information for historical linguistics since they have some unusual linguistic and pragma-linguistic characteristics.

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, I shall present a general overview of these manuscripts. Then I will focus on the complicated interactional setting that the birch-bark

documents were part of and will show how this affects the linguistic and communicative structure of the documents.

## 1. General description of the birch-bark corpus

The first birch-bark document was found on 26 July 1951 during archaeological excavations in the city of Novgorod in north-west Russia. Great Novgorod was a city of great economic and political power and played an important role in mediaeval Russia. The archaeological layers of Novgorod date back to the late tenth century, the time of the Christianisation of Rus'. Between 1136 and 1478 CE Novgorod was the centre of the Novgorod Republic (*Novgorodskaya Respublika*), a rather independent structure within the Rus' territory and in the fourteenth century it was the largest and most prosperous Russian city.[4]

Extensive excavations began in Novgorod and the surrounding area after World War II and are still going on today. They have unearthed an enormous number of archaeological artefacts, including birch-bark manuscripts. The birch-bark documents were found in various cultural layers on the territory of private homesteads (Fig. 2). According to Janin,[5] the existence of birch-bark archives is highly unlikely since messages on birch bark were considered to be of temporary value only (see below). They have been preserved due to high soil humidity, which prevents organic material like leather, bone and wood from decaying.

Now we have approximately 1,200 documents and the number is still growing. More than a thousand pieces of birch-bark writing were found in the city of Novgorod

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[1] The general public has also taken a great interest in these documents. The yearly excavations in the city of Novgorod receive extensive media coverage, particularly in the local media, and the anniversary of the day when the first document was found is publicly celebrated ('Birch-bark Day', *Den' beresty*, 26 July).

[2] Other cities with birch-bark finds are Pskov, Staraja Russa, Toržok, Tver', Moscow, Nižny Novgorod, Vitebsk, Smolensk, Mstislavl', Staraja Rjazan' and Zvenigorod Galickij. In 2013, archaeologists found a birch-bark document as far away as Staroturuxansk in the Krasnodar region in Eastern Siberia; see Tjemina 2013.

[3] For a comparison with similar corpora in other cultures (*rúnakefli*, Vindolanda tablets, papyri), cf. Franklin 2002, 35–47, and Schaeken 2012, 204–205. Birch bark was used as writing material in other cultures as well – see the collection of Mongolian manuscripts described in Chiodo 2000–2009 and Indic Buddhist manuscripts (cf. the contributions in Harrison/Hartmann 2014). I am indebted to Michael Friedrich for drawing my attention to these manuscripts.

[4] The 'Novgorod Republic' existed from 1136, when Prince Vsevolod was ousted from Novgorod, until its forcible annexing to the Grand Duchy of Moscow in 1478. It was ruled by the aristocracy and the archbishop; the prince only played a marginal role. For an outline of the history of mediaeval Novgorod, see Goehrke 1981 and Crummey 1987, 32–34.
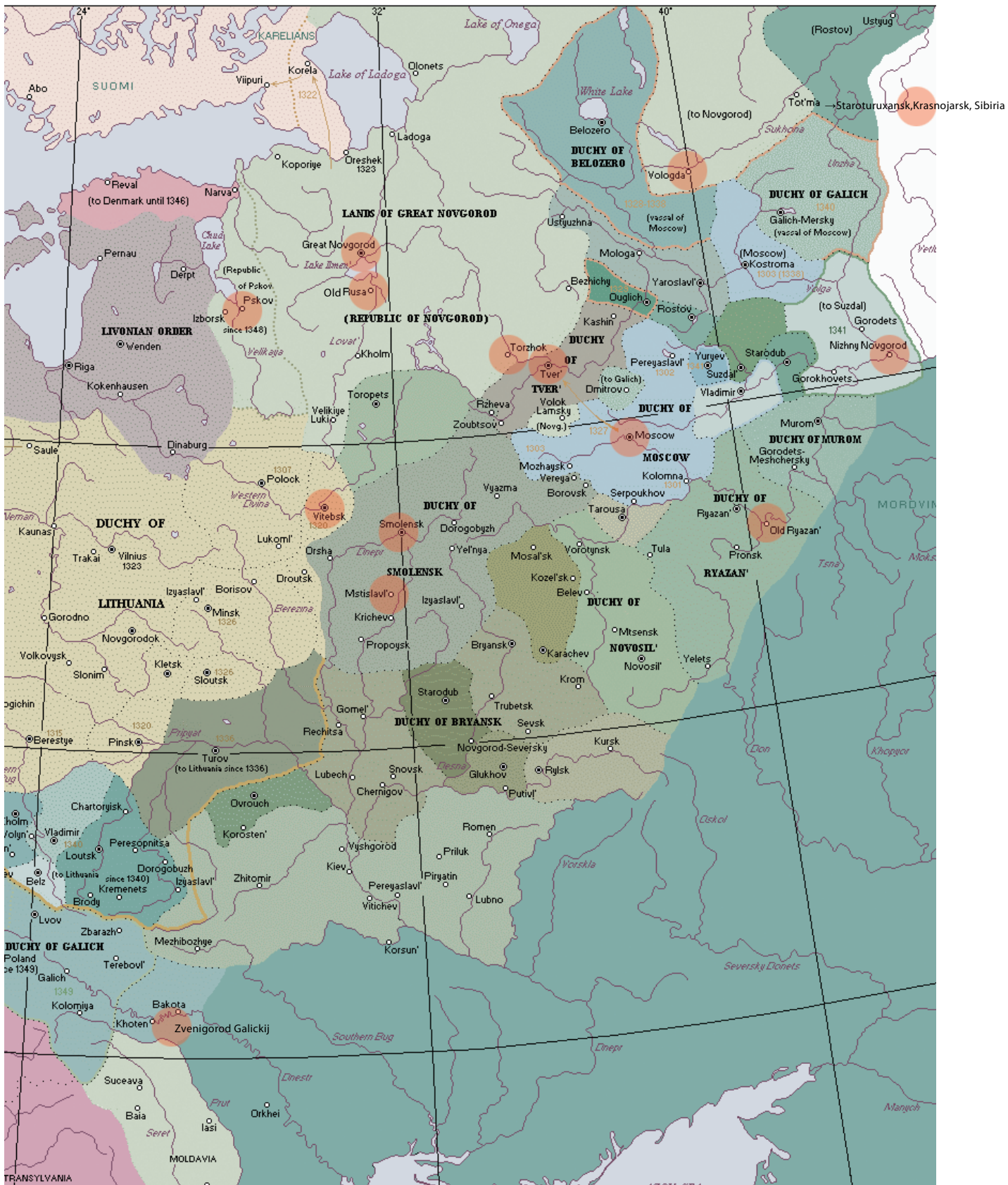
[5] Janin 1995, 212–213.

Fig. 1: Eastern Europe, *c.* 1350. Birch-bark manuscripts' finds are marked with orange circles.

alone,[6] some in other cities, mostly in the north-west or west of Russia (Map 1). The birch-bark documents cover a period of about four-and-a-half centuries, the oldest coming from the first half of the eleventh century, the youngest ones from the late fifteenth century. Almost all of the documents are datable because of them belonging to clear archaeological strata and because of dendrochronology. The number of birch-bark documents was not spread evenly over the centuries: after a steady increase and peak in the 1160–1180s, the count dropped drastically in the first two decades of the thirteenth century, only to rise again up to the late fourteenth century. The reason for the decline in the number of manuscripts is not altogether clear. It was possibly related to the military threats to the Novgorod borders posed by the Teutonic Order in the west and the Swedes in the north-west and the resulting economic regression Novgorod suffered in the early thirteenth century.[7]

The birch-bark manuscripts are rather small documents, typically 15–40 cm wide and 2–8 cm high. The text was usually written on the inner surface, rarely on the outside, but some documents have text written on both sides. They were found rolled up in a scroll, the inner surface being on the outside.[8] The text was generally written along the grain – only the Moscow manuscripts were written across it.[9] Most messages were very short and did not contain any more than 20 words.[10] In some cases, two or more pieces of birch bark were used for longer messages, such as no. 519/520[11] and no. 698/699.[12] The message was carved into the bark with a

stylus usually made of iron, but sometimes bronze or bone (Fig. 3);[13] only three messages were written in ink[14] (Fig. 4).

About a quarter of the documents are almost entirely preserved; the rest are fragments, some of them so small that they are hardly interpretable.

Figures 5 und 6 show some typical finds: one is preserved in its entirety, while the other one is a fragment and comes in two pieces. No. 43 (Fig. 5) – one of the most famous birch-bark letters of all – is a note from a *boyar*[15] to his wife or another female family member. Its transliteration and translation is given in example (1). No. 4 (see Fig. 6) is a letter from someone called Mikita to someone with the name Cert. Unfortunately, we cannot restore the text accurately because the document is so badly damaged. Therefore, I can only provide a transliteration (2)[16]:

*(1) No. 43, 1380–1400*

ω[17] borisa ko nostasii kako p
ride sja gramota tako priš
li mi colověkъ na žerepčě
zane mi zděse dělъ mnogo da
prišli sorocicju sorocičě za
byle

From Boris to Onostasija. When you get this *gramota*, send me a man on a stallion as I've got a lot to do. And send me a shirt [as] I forgot my shirt.

*(2) No. 4, 1320–1340*

ω mikit ě ko certou cto jesm ь … …
rucilъ ou petra na gorodišč ě n…
jurgi bylъ vydalъ so dvora . n…

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[6] There is one Latin manuscript among the birch-bark manuscripts found in Novgorod (No. 488, fragments of a psalm; Arcixovskij and Janin 1978, 80–83, Janin 1995, 19) and there is also one Karelian document (No. 292, a spell; Arcixovskij and Borkovskij 1963, 120–122).

[7] See Schaeken 2012 for possible reasons and a detailed description of the chronological distribution. Also see Worth 1990.

[8] Arcixovskij and Tixomirov 1953, 6.

[9] Gippius et al. 2011, 453.

[10] The longest birch-bark document found so far is Moscow No. 3. It contains 52 lines with about 370 words, see Gippius et al. 2011, 453.

[11] The documents excavated in the city of Novgorod are only identified by a number (e.g. 'No. 43'); finds from other places are referred to by the name of the place where they were uncovered and a number (e.g. 'Tver' 5').

[12] Zaliznjak 2004, 17.

[13] Rybina and Janin 2009, 93.

[14] These are Nos. 13 and 496 (Zaliznjak 2004, 17) and Moscow No. 3 (Gippius et al. 2011, 453, and Makarov 2008). All three of them are relatively young: Moscow No. 3 is from the late fourteenth/early fifteenth century and No. 13 and No. 496 are from the mid-fifteenth century, which is incidentally also the period when writing on paper with ink became increasingly common due to the lower cost of paper (Janin 1995, 216).

[15] *Boyar* – member of the highest rank of nobility next to the prince.

[16] The examples are cited in Latin transliteration. Square brackets indicate doubtful or only partially legible characters, and conjectures are enclosed in round brackets. Square brackets around three dots […] indicate an omission by me. The translations are based on Zaliznjak 2004 unless indicated otherwise. The website <www.gramoty.ru> presents most of the birch-bark documents, including photographs, outlines, Cyrillic transliterations and translations into modern Russian.

[17] ω transliterates the double letter ꙍ.

Fig. 2: Archaeological excavations undertaken by Bournemouth University at the Troitsky site in Novgorod in 1998; excavated wooden buildings from the first half of the fourteenth century.

Fig. 3: Tools for writing on birch bark, eleventh–fifteenth century.



Fig. 4: Moscow No. 3, late fourteenth/early fifteenth century.

ne ouvědalsja a mene vydalъ … (re)

klъ jesi železnogo …

rublъ vzjav ъ a ty n… …

 ndr- ispravi gosp…

vozmi sapozě

### 1.1 Writing on birch bark

Birch-bark literacy can be characterised as 'pragmatic' or 'practical' literacy.[18] Dealing with the concerns of urban life, the items of bark writing played an important role in organising daily life in Novgorod and other mediaeval cities.

The participants of birch-bark correspondence were 'the urban elites at a level below that of the princes and the bishops: predominantly (but not exclusively) laymen, predominantly (but not exclusively) men, predominantly (and perhaps exclusively, at least for the first three centuries) people of means'.[19]

Unlike writing on parchment, the messages on birch bark were considered to be ephemeral. They were written for the moment and not intended to be kept for a longer period or archived. After a birch-bark manuscript was delivered and read, it was often torn in two or more pieces and discarded. Parchment was used to transmit contents that were meant to be accessible for a longer period of time, e.g. deeds, chronicles, ecclesiastical texts etc.[20] In some cases, birch bark was used to draft a message that was subsequently written on parchment (e.g. No 358). After the message was put on parchment, the birch-bark document became expendable and was likely to be thrown away.[21] This ephemeral status is probably the most noteworthy feature of birch-bark literacy.

The birch-bark documents can be classified into several groups by their content and function:

1. letters (messages relating to family affairs, businesses, legal affairs and other issues of daily life),
2. different kinds of lists and registers (e.g. debts, tributes, inventories),
3. documents related to schooling (spelling exercises, alphabets, drawings, cf. Fig. 7),
4. literary and folklore texts,
5. official documents or drafts of such documents (wills, documents relating to legal matters, very few treaties, one bill of sale for land and property),
6. tags and labels (probably propriety tags and price labels)
7. church-related documents.

The letters are by far the largest group (group 1), accounting for more than 60% of all birch-bark documents. The lists and registers constitute the second-largest group (approximately 14%), while the remaining groups are each represented by a very small number of documents.[22]

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[18] Schaeken 2012, 203, Gippius 2012, 225.

[19] Franklin 2002, 39.

[20] See Franklin 2002, 22–35 and 40, Schaeken 2012, 204 and passim.

[21] On the relation between ephemeral birch-bark letters and more formalised parchment documents, see Franklin 2002, 183–185.

[22] Zaliznjak 2004, 20, Gippius 2012, 226, n. 3.

Fig. 5: No. 43, 1380–1400, <http://gramoty.ru>, courtesy of V. L. Janin.

In order to understand the enormous impact the birch-bark findings have had on the study of the history of the Russian language and culture, we need to consider what was known about literacy in early Rus' before the discovery of the birch-bark manuscripts. The written word and the spread of Cyrillic script came to mediaeval Russia in the wake of Christianisation. Ecclesiastical writing appeared in Rus' shortly after the official conversion of the state by the Kievan prince Vladimir the Great in 988.[23] The language used in these manuscripts was Church Slavonic, a language imported from Bulgaria. Church Slavonic is closely related to the vernacular(s) of the East Slavonic area, but is sufficiently different to be called a different language or variety. Church Slavonic was never a language of everyday communication; rather, it was purposely designed for ecclesiastical use or, even more specifically, for translating ecclesiastical texts from Greek. It was highly 'bookish' in style and intention. The Old Russian vernacular, in turn, was the language of secular life. Not only was it the spoken language, but it was also used for secular writing – in treaties, law books, deeds of donation and other such formal documents. Only a very small number of texts written in the vernacular were known of until the discovery of the birch-barks. There were no documents from the eleventh century, almost none from the twelfth century and only a few from the thirteenth century.[24] The Church Slavonic documents far outnumbered (and still outnumber) the vernacular ones.

Since the overwhelming majority of the birch-bark documents use the Old Russian vernacular, their discovery promised to be evidence not only of widespread non-ecclesiastical Old Russian literacy but also of colloquial
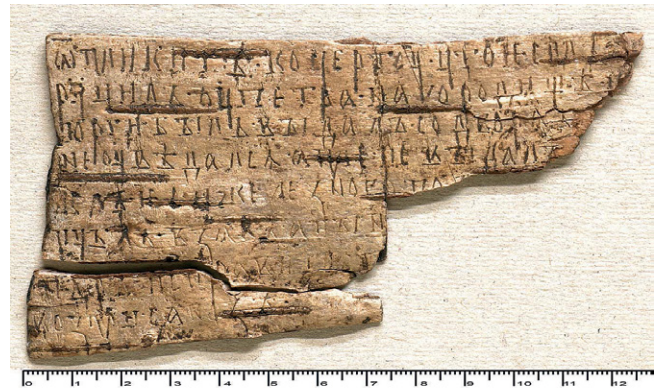


Fig. 6: No. 4, 1320–1340, <http://gramoty.ru>, courtesy of V. L. Janin.

Old Russian. Disappointment soon prevailed after the first excitement and enthusiasm over the new finds, however. Many of the texts turned out to be very difficult to read and impossible to understand. The reason was first sought in the authors and scribes of the documents, who were judged to be only half-literate and unable to produce intelligible, coherent texts.

Only after decades of research have we been able to read, understand and interpret the birch-bark documents. We have come to realise that the overwhelming majority of the birch documents were not only perfectly coherent, but also diligently composed. Thanks to the outstanding work of A. A. Zaliznjak, A. A. Gippius, J. Schaeken and others, we are now in a position to appreciate the importance and uniqueness of this corpus fully.

The factors that made the analysis so difficult in the beginning are at the same time typical features of the birch-bark documents: many documents, especially those from the late twelfth and the thirteenth centuries, show a particular orthographic system, different to other Old Russian or Church Slavonic sources.[25] The majority of the documents use the so-called Old Novgorod dialect (*drevnenovgorodskij dialekt*), which shows some significant differences when compared to 'supra-regional Old Russian' (*naddialektnyj drevnerusskij*).[26] And last but not least, the birch-bark documents – in particular the letters – are tightly interwoven with the communication situation and often need extra-linguistic knowledge or assumptions in order to make sense.[27]

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[23] This traditional view is challenged by Franklin, who argues that there was noticeable secular Cyrillic writing before Christianisation (Franklin 2002, 120–27). However, I lean towards the traditional theory, since the material evidence for pre-Christian literacy is very scarce; also see Gippius 2012.

[24] See Kiparsky 1963, 30–66 for an – albeit incomplete – survey of Old Russian and Church Slavonic documents up to the fourteenth century.

[25] Zaliznjak 2002.

[26] Zaliznjak 2004, 3.

[27] See sections 2.1.1–2.1.3 below.

Fig. 7: No. 623, 1200–1220, spelling exercise, <http://gramoty.ru>, courtesy of V. L. Janin.

## 2. The messages

Formulating, delivering and receiving a message on birch bark was a complicated process that involved many different roles: that of the author, addresser, scribe, messenger, reader and addressee. Some of these could be fulfilled by one and the same person, of course: the author and scribe were often identical, the messenger knew the content, heard it from the sender and sometimes wrote the message or read it out loud, etc. He played an essential role in transmitting the whole message. Unlike most other written documents, the birch-bark manuscripts are not necessarily the main element in the communicative act, but often merely play a supporting role.[28]

Their ephemeral nature notwithstanding, most birch-bark documents were composed very carefully. The messages were written with noticeable diligence and show very few mistakes or corrections. They usually have a clear textual pattern. A typical letter consists of an opening of varying length followed by the main part, which formulates a certain concern concisely and articulately.[29] Sometimes the letters are concluded by a closing formula (see 2.1.5).[30] The most striking feature, however, is their so-called laconism or brevity:[31] the essence of the message is reduced to its very gist, almost artfully and without any redundancies or repetitions.[32] Let us take a look at some typical examples.

The following example is a bill of exchange. Kur owes Boran some money, but instead of paying it himself, Kur tells Boran to go and get it from Ivan, one of his own debtors:

*(3) No. 690, 1360–1380*

poklono ѡᵗ kura ko boranu i ko kuzmi vozmi svoju poltinu u jevana u vyjanina bo plotiniccikomo konci podo borisoglibomo

Greetings from Kur to Boran and Kuz'ma. Get your half-rouble from Ivan of [the village of] Vyja in the Plotnickij quarter by [the church of] Boris and Gleb

The next document is a petition (*čelobitnaja*) from peasants to their feudal lord:[33]

*(4) No. 311, 1400–1410*

[gн̄u s]voejemu mixailu jurejevi[č]u [xrest]jani·tvoi čerenšani čelo bijute što jesi ѡdoda dereveneku klimecu ѡparinu a my jego ne xъtimo ne susědnei čelověko voleno bъ de i ty

Your peasants from [the village of] Čerenskoe prostrate themselves before our Lord, Mixail Jurevič. You gave the hamlet to Klimec Oparin, but we don't want him, [as] he is not one of our men. God and you are free [to decide].

### 2.1. Orality and literacy in the birch-bark manuscripts

The birch-bark manuscripts display a number of features that are more typical of spoken communication than of written texts.[34] This is particularly true of the letters (group 1; see section 2.1.1). Letters in general have some oral features as well since they address another person directly, thereby making reference to a certain discourse situation. The birch-bark letters, however, show a degree of orality that goes far beyond what we would usually expect from letters. This is partly due to the complex interactional setting the letters were part of. But at the same time, they are good examples of mediaeval Russian literacy, a fact that has taken a back seat in many discussions.

In the following sections, I will address this issue using Koch's and Österreicher's framework of 'conceptual orality'

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[28] Gippius 2004, 184–185.

[29] See Zaliznjak 1987 for a detailed description of the discourse structure of the birch-bark letters.

[30] Zaliznjak 2004, 3.

[31] Zaliznjak 1987, 187.

[32] See examples (1), (2), (3), (9) and (16), just to name a few.

[33] Zaliznjak 2004, 20 and Gippius 2012, 226, n. 3 consider the *čelobitnye* as a separate group, being 'closely related' to the letters (l.c.). However, the site <www.gramoty.ru> includes them in the group '*pis'ma*' (letters).

[34] Cf. Gippius 2004, Gippius 2012, Gippius and Schaeken 2011, Schaeken 2011, Schaeken 2014 and Živov 2003, for example.

and 'conceptual literacy'[35]. It is obvious that the distinction between oral and written discourse is not only a question of whether we talk or write, but it also pertains to the linguistic characteristics of discourse. A sophisticated keynote speech resembles a written text much more than a text message on a mobile phone, which, in turn, has more in common with colloquial speech. The terms 'conceptual orality' and 'conceptual literacy' accommodate this circumstance. They refer to the linguistic features of prototypical oral and written discourse respectively, but form a scalar contrast rather than a binary opposition. A given text can be placed anywhere on this scale, depending on its linguistic features. If it only has features that are typical of oral texts, like a family conversation, it is very close to the 'oral end' of the scale, an article on astrophysics is the quintessential written text, and an interview on TV is located somewhere in-between.

Many features of oral and written discourse can be deduced from the respective prototypical discourse situations. Prototypical oral communication relies on the fact that the participants can hear and see each other. Mistakes can be corrected and misunderstandings be cleared up immediately. We can point to objects instead of naming them and we usually use the speech situation as a reference system. Oral discourse is instant and immediate. There is not much time for planning and interpreting the utterances, hence information is usually broken up into small, easily 'digestible' chunks.

The opposite is true of prototypical written discourse: the participants are separated from each other in space and time, which is why it is harder – if not impossible – to clear up any misunderstandings. One has to put more effort into 'packaging' the message, as it were. We have to be clear and explicit, we have to avoid ambiguity and we can, as a rule, not use the production situation as a reference system. On the upside, there is usually enough time to compose and understand the message. This allows us to use longer sentences and more complex syntactic constructions.

## 2.1.1 Communicative heterogeneity

The most conspicuous feature of many birch-bark letters is what Gippius[36] calls their 'communicative heterogeneity' (*kommunikativnaja neodnorodnost'*). Heterogeneous letters are birch-barks that contain more than one message, i.e. birch-bark documents that have two different authors or two different addressees (the second speaker respectively addressee is emphasized by italics in the translation). Heterogeneity is without doubt a feature of orality, since it refers to the participants of a communicative act that includes multiple persons, thus simulating oral discourse.

Heterogeneity can be overt, i.e. explicitly indicated, or covert, i.e. without being expressed formally.[37] The following documents are examples of overt heterogeneity. Example (5) contains two messages addressed to two different people. The change of addressee is indicated by directly referring to the addressee with the expression 'and you + name'. I will cite the relevant part of the letter here:

*(5) No. 358, 1340–1360*

[…] poslalъ jesmь s posadnicimъ manuilomъ :k: bělъ k tobě *a ty nestere pro čicjakъ prišli ko mni gramotu s kimъ budešъ poslalъ* […]

[…] I sent you 20 *bely*[38] with the mayor. *And you, Nester, send me a* gramota *about the helmet, with whoever you send it* […]

Letter No. 831 also has two different addressees. Moreover, the two messages clearly differ in status. The first message is very long and both sides of the birch-bark letters are written on. The author – who writes in the name of several addressers – complains to the first addressee, Raguil, that he got drawn into a legal skirmish with someone else. The second message is much shorter and makes reference to the first one. It tells the second addressee, Stepan, to put the first message on parchment and send it somewhere. Apparently, birch bark was used to draft important messages that were later written on parchment.[39] This indirectly confirms the aforementioned ephemeral nature of the birch-bark documents: they were meant to be written, read and then thrown away, whereas

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[35] On 'konzeptuelle Mündlichkeit' as opposed to 'konzeptuelle Schriftlichkeit', see Günther 1997, Koch 1985, and Koch and Österreicher 1986 and 1994.

[36] Gippius 2004, 185.

[37] Gippius 2004, 190.

[38] *běla*: monetary unit.

[39] Zaliznjak 2004, 304.

parchment was used for more important documents, which were supposed to last for a long time. In example (6), I cite the beginning of the first and the second messages:

*(6) No. 831, 1140–1160*

ѡᵗ kouzьme i otъ deti ego къ ragouilovi ko starьšoum[o](u)

[…]

*a ty stepane pьrьpesavo na xarotitiju posъli žь* (…)

From Kuz'ma and his children to Raguil the Elder

[…]

*And you, Stepan, after having written this on parchment, send it* (…)

No. 952 shows two messages by two different addressers. The first message is from Radko and the second one from Vjačeška. The addressee is probably the same person for both messages, i.e. Lazor' is Radko's father:[40]

*(7) No. 952, 1140–1160*

ѡᵗ radъka къ otьcьvi poklanjanie tovarьcь esьmo posъlalь smolьnьskou a poutilou ti oubili a xotjatь ny jati vъ fomou sъ vjacьšьkoju a mъlъvja zaplatite četyri sъta grivьnъ ili a zovite fomou sěmo paky li da vъsadimo vy vъ pogrьbo *i poklanjanie ѡᵗ vjacьšьkě къ lazorьvi poslalь esmь konь jukovoucьko a samь esmь dospělь*

Greetings from Radko to his father. I sent the merchandise to Smolensk. Putila was killed there. They wanted to arrest Vjačeška and me in lieu of Foma, saying: 'Pay 400 *grivna* or get Foma to come here. If not, we will put you in the dungeon'. *And greetings from Vjačeška to Lazor'. I sent a sumpter, and I am all prepared.*[41]

The following example illustrates covert heterogeneity. The first message ends with the words … *da bogo vamo radoste* 'may God give you delight ' and is an invitation to relatives to come to the city. The following words *mi vašego solova voxi ne osotavimo* 'we will all not ignore your request' must be read as the answer to the invitation or the letter will not make much sense.[42]The handwriting is the same throughout

the whole document, so it was presumably the messenger who wrote both messages, the invitation as well as the answer:

*(8) No. 497, 1340–1360*

poklon ѡ gavrili ѡ poseni ko zati moemu ko gorigori ži koumou i ko sestori moei ko ouliti čo bi este poixali vo gorodo ko radosti moei a našego solova ne ѡstavili da bogo vamo radoste *mi vašego solova voxi ne ѡsotavimo*

Greetings from Gavrila Postnja to my brother-in-law Grigorij, the godfather, and to my sister Ulita. Would you come into the city, to my delight, and don't ignore our request. May God give you delight. *None of us will ignore your request.*[43]

No. 177 probably presents a case of overt heterogeneity as well. According to Gippius[44], there are also two addressees involved, namely the priest (*pop*) and Foma. The new addressee is not addressed explicitly by name in the vocative form, but the author uses the phrase *a ty* 'and you' instead:[45]

*(9) No. 177, 1360–1380*

pokon ѡᵗ maskima ko popu dai ključi fomi a *ty poši grigoriju ѡnefimova čto b(u)[d](e na)dobi […][46] foma*

Greeting from Maksim to the priest. Give the keys to Foma, *and you send Grigor'ja Onfimov. If anything is needed* […] *Foma.*

*2.1.2 Implicitness*

Another feature of orality is implicitness. Not everything has to be spelled out in spoken discourse because the presence of the discourse participants and the possibility of quickly correcting errors and misunderstandings allow for a certain vagueness and ambiguity. The birch-bark letters show a great deal of such implicitness. Clause-combining is often asyndetic, and if conjunctions are used, they are mostly not very specific from a semantic point of view.[47] In addition,

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[40] Janin and Zaliznjak 2015, 46–49.

[41] Translated on the basis of Janin and Zaliznjak 2015, 46–49.

[42] Schaeken, 2011; 2014, 156–58, Gippius and Zaliznjak 2015, 244–245.

[43] Translated on the basis of Gippius and Zaliznjak 2015, 244–245.

[44] Gippius 2004, 196–97.

[45] As Dekker points out (2014, 19), changes of addressee also occur in other Old Russian documents like the 'Documents of Great Novgorod and Pskov' (*Gramoty Velikogo Novgoroda i Pskova*), but not without explicitly naming the new addressee.

[46] The characters between *nadobi* and *foma* are not decipherable.

[47] The most frequent conjunctions are *i*, *a*, *ože* and *čto*, each of which has several meanings; cf. Zaliznjak 1987, 181.

referential expressions are sometimes impossible to interpret without extra-linguistic information, as demonstrated in the following example. The pronoun *emu* 'him' refers to the person who abused the author of the letter, but the message does not contain any hint about his identity.

*(10) No. 725, 1180–1200*

ωᵗ rьmьše poklanjanьe kъ klimja(tě) i kъ pavl[ou]б̄: dělja kotorei ljubo potroudisja do vladyčě sъka(ž)ita vladyčě moju obidou i moi boi želěza a ja emu ne dъlъžьne ničimъ že i molju va sja

Greetings from Remša to Klimjata and Pavel. For God's sake, one of you please go to the archbishop, tell the archbishop about my misery and the beatings and the iron chains. I don't owe *him* anything. I beg you.

Implicitness also characterises discourse structure. As evidenced by letters with covert heterogeneity, the role of a certain piece of text is not always marked explicitly. A similar phenomenon is the lack of overt indication of direct speech, the following example being a case in point.[48] The document refers to the habit of marking trees that carry beehives and honey as one's possession. In order to get a plausible interpretation, the clauses *jazo dubie ωtimaju po svoei meti* 'I am taking away the oaks on my own mark' meaning 'I mark the oaks as my own', and *to mi dubo vaše bortiko okralosja pervy* 'it is my oak, your beekeeper has fallen into robbery first' should be interpreted as instances of direct speech, although there is no formal marker to indicate this:[49]

*(11) Tver' 5, 1300–1320*

ωᵗ iliice ko ilie šjuiga dubie perepisyvaete a [b]cely ti lazilo jazo dubie ωᵗimaju po svoei meti a te[s]no sotesyvaete to moi dubo vaše bortiko okralosja pervy […]

From Ilijca to Il'ja. Šujga is writing over [the marks on] the oaks and has taken honey from the hives, [saying:] 'I am taking away the oaks on my own mark'. He is cutting away the cut-mark, [saying:] 'It's my oak. Your beekeeper has fallen into robbery first.' […][50]

Another important manifestation of implicitness is ellipsis. As pointed out by Živov, ellipsis is one of the main cohesive devices in the birch-bark documents.[51] No. 142, one of Živov's examples, illustrates the elliptical style so typical of the birch-bark letters:

*(12) No. 142, 1300–1320*

[…] a četъ ωmьšě prišlju i vy imъ kъne mъi golubyi daite sъ ljudmi date sъxě ne klade a ne vъzme i vy vo stadъ pustite pedъ ljudmi […]

[…] and if they send the ploughshares, give them my grey horse in front of people, so he won't put [the horse][52] in the *sokha*[53]. And if he won't take [the horse], let [it] go to the flock in front of other people […]

### 2.1.3 Use of deictic expressions

The frequent occurrence of deictic expressions, i.e. of expressions like *I*, *you*, *here*, *there*, *this* or *that*, is also typical of spoken discourse as the referents of such expressions can only be identified in relation to the immediate discourse situation (emphasized by italics). The birch-bark documents also employ deictic expressions, but not very often. Evidence is given in examples (13) and (14). The expression *sja gramota* in (13) refers to the document itself, and the demonstrative pronoun *semu* in (14) refers to the messenger:

*(13) No. 43, 1380–1400*

[…] kako pride sja gramota tako prišli mi colověkъ na žerebcě […]

[…] when you get *this gramota*, send me a man on a stallion

*(14) No. 879, 1120–1140*[54]

ωᵗ žirjatь poklanjanie ko radjatь vodai semu eže rьklo vъrьšcju tu.

Greetings from Žirjata to Radjata. Give *him* [= the messenger] what he said, [namely] the grain.

---

[48] Unlike example (7), where the author uses *mъlъvja* 'saying' to introduce direct speech.

[49] Gippius and Schaeken 2011, Gippius and Zaliznjak 2015, 273–274.

[50] Translation from Gippius and Schaeken 2011, 18.

[51] Živov 2003, 289.

[52] The brackets indicate the omissions in the Old Russian text.

[53] *sokha*: a light wooden plough, which was used in north-eastern Europe.

[54] According to Gippius 2004, 205, letter No. 879 is a written authorisation for an orally delivered message. It nicely demonstrates the auxiliary role many of the birch-bark documents had in the communicative act as a whole.

*2.1.4 Syntax and information structure*

As argued before, complex syntactic structures are more typical of written texts, whereas oral discourse prefers simple sequences of predications. In this respect, the birch-bark letters show both oral and written features. On the one hand, most of the sentences are iconic, i.e. they name events in their natural order, like No. 538:

*(15) No. 538, 1380–1400*

prikazъ ѡᵗ popadьi k popu čto ou tebe bylo a pošlo k onanii a ninece pronositsja ѡᵗ kjurьjaka a ninece ponaboli o tomъ.

Request from the priest's wife to the priest: What happened to you happened to Onan'ja [as well] and now it is being spread by Kjur'jak. Do something about it.

Iconicity is a corollary of the fact that the birch-bark letters prefer asyndetic structures and highly polysemous connectives (see 2.1.2 above). Anti-iconic ordering needs more specialised connectives that unequivocally indicate the temporal and causal relation between the events ('after', 'because', 'since', etc.).

Word order and information structure follow the principles of oral rather than written communication as well. The main part of the message (topic) comes first, to be specified in the following part (comment).[55] Typically, the topic is introduced by the pronoun *čto* (cf. No. 99, *a čto u tebe nedobore stari* 'as regards your old loss') or the connective *a* (cf. No. 124 *a lodku* 'and the boat', No. 124):

*(16) No. 99, 1340–1360*

[…] *a čto ou tebe nedobore stari* prišli zerebe

[…] *and as regards your old loss*, send a [note with your] share

*(17) No. 124, 1400–1410*

prišlite mi paroboko borana ili udu mně sja ne možetsja *a lodku* dai pavlu sobolecevu izo nama

'send me a servant – Boran or Uda – [as] I'm not doing very well. *And the boat*, lend [it] to Pavel Sobol'cev'

This principle also holds on the level of the phrase, where it can cause a violation of projectivity, i.e. the separation

of elements that form one syntactic constituent.[56] Consider the following examples. In (18), the phrase *žiznobude novъgorodъske 'Žiznobud*, a peasant from Novgorod' is broken up after the word *žiznobude* by the insertion of the words *pogoublene* 'killed' and *ou syčevicь* 'at Syčevič's [house]':

*(18) No. 607/562, 1075–1100*

žiznobude pogoublene ou syčevicь novъgorodъske smьrde […]

lit.: Žiznobud killed at Syčevič's Novgorod peasant

'Žiznobud, a peasant from Novgorod, was killed at Sycevič's [house] […]'

In (19), the phrase *dalь jesmь Dmitru cerenecju* '[I] gave to Dmitr, the monk' separates *druguju* 'another' from *poltinu* 'half-rouble':

*(19) No. 689, 1360–1380*

[…] druguju dalь jesmь dmitru cerenecju polotinu […]

lit.: another [I] gave to Dmitr the monk half-rouble

[…] I gave another half-rouble to Dmitr the monk […]

On the other hand, the birch-bark letters regularly make use of hierarchically ordered, complex structures like relative clauses and constructions with participles. (20) demonstrates the use of participles (*vodja novouju ženou* 'having married a new wife'), whereas (21) is an example of a relative construction:

*(20) No. 9, 1160–1180*

[…] a nyně vodja novuju ženou a mьně vъdastь ničьto […]

[…] and now, having married a new wife, he won't give me anything […]

*(21) No. 600, 1220–1240*

[…] se poslali dva mouža xotynjane k ---- pro tu tjažju pro reku pro čto to poslale negane ѡᵗ knjazja i ѡᵗ tebe […]

[…] The people from Chotyn sent two men to [you] about the lawsuit about the river, because of which Negan had sent [someone] in the Prince's and your name […]

---

[55] Zaliznjak 1987, Mendoza 2007.

[56] Zaliznjak 2004, 189–190, Živov 2003.

Fig. 8: No. 682, 1160–1180, <www.gramoty.ru>, courtesy of V. L. Janin.
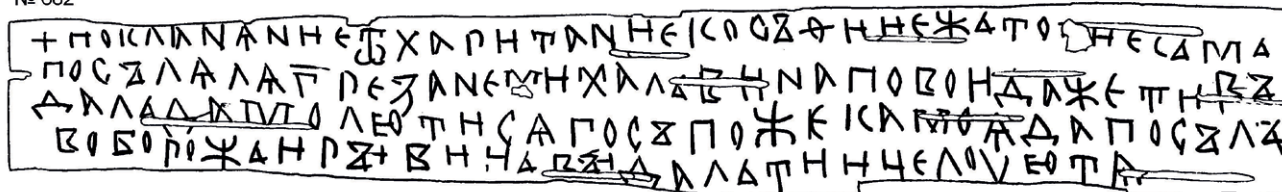


Fig. 9: Outline of No. 682, <www.gramoty.ru>, courtesy of V. L. Janin.

### 2.1.5 Formulaic elements

Most of the birch-bark letters begin with a formula of address. The early documents have very simple patterns and only name the addresser and addressee. In the course of time, the formulae become more sophisticated and more deferential. The following examples show their increasing complexity: (22) from the eleventh century only mentions the addressee and addresser, whereas (23) and (24) use the deferential expressions *poklanjanie* 'bow', 'greeting' and *poklonъ* (idem) and in (25) we see *čelobitьe* 'prostration', which was not in use until the fourteenth century.[57]

*(22) No. 613, 1050–1075.*

gramota ωᵗ voněga kъ s[t]av[ъro](vi)

*gramota* from Vonega to Stavr

*(23) No. 952, 1140–1160*

ωᵗ radъka kъ otьсьvi poklanjanie

greetings from Radko to Father

*(24) No. 497, 1340–1360*

poklono ω gavrili ω poseni ko zati moemu ko gorigori ži koumou i ko sestori moei ko ouliti

greetings from Gavrila Postnja to my brother-in-law, the godfather Grigorij and to my sister Ulita

*(25) No. 129, 1410–1420*

colobitьje ωᵗ jesifa bratu svojemu fomě

prostration from Jesif to his brother Foma

Another important element of the incipit is a cross at the very beginning of the text, as evidenced by No. 682. Unfortunately, the cross is hardly discernible in the photograph (Fig. 8), but the outline (Fig. 9) makes its presence clear.

The initial cross occurs in many of the early birch-bark documents (from the eleventh to the early thirteenth century)[58] and is also typical of Old Russian official documents on parchment.[59] According to Zaliznjak, its presence in a birch-bark documents emphasises the importance of the message.[60]

Closing formulae are rarer and less stereotypical.[61] Early formulae are *dobrě sъtvorja/dobro sъtvorja/dobro sъtvori* 'please' and *i cěluju tja* 'and I give you my regards'. In No. 497 (ex. (8) above) we find *da bog vamo radoste* 'may God give you delight'; (26) below is an example of a very long and deferential closing phrase including the expression *celomъ biju* 'I prostrate':

---

[57] Cf. Worth 1984, Zaliznjak 1987, 150–59; 2004, 36–37, Gippius 2009; 2012, 245–46 for detailed descriptions of the chronological order of the incipits. Also see the tables in Zaliznjak 2000, 281 and 284.

[58] Gippius 2012, 248 .

[59] See Franklin 2002, 267, mentioning the sanctio spiritualis – God's punishment which is called upon via the depiction of the cross in all administrative documents of the period.

[60] Zaliznjak 1987, 151. However, see Franklin 2002, 267 about the talismanic function of the cross in most non-parchment Christian writing in Rus' explicitly including birch-bark manuscripts.

[61] Gippius 2009, 285.

*(24) Staraja Russa 40, late fourteenth century*

a jazъ ѡspodinu svojemu rodivonu i svoi sestri mojei mnogo celomъ biju

and I very humbly prostrate myself in front of my Lord Rodivon and my sister

The use of formulaic expressions is a feature typical of written text. Moreover, the formulae used in the birch-bark manuscripts are clearly influenced by Church Slavonic writing. This is particularly true of the early letters. Typically, Church Slavonic formulae like *i cĕluju tja* or *poklanjanie* or the use of the cross do not occur later than the thirteenth century.[62] At the same time, the development of these elements indicates an increasing independence of the birch-bark documents from the immediate communicative act, a process of 'emancipating' the act of writing from oral discourse.[63]

## 3. Conclusion

The analysis presented here shows that one of the ordering principles of the birch-bark manuscripts, in particular the letters, is a highly specific set of oral and literate features. On the one hand, they show pronounced characteristics of orality, namely heterogeneity and implicitness. On the other hand, the formulaic expressions with their Church Slavonic background, the clear organisational patterns and the overall diligence in wording and writing are features typical of written discourse and thus point to the other end of the orality–literacy scale.

One possible explanation of this peculiar situation lies in the double origin of birch-bark literacy: it may be the result of the close interaction between the mundane and the sacred in mediaeval Russia. As Gippius[64] convincingly argues, birch-bark literacy started out as a 'by-product of ecclesiastical culture'[65] and was closely connected with clerical circles

at first. Only as time went by did it loosen its ties to Church Slavonic literacy. Simultaneously, early birch-bark documents were deeply rooted in the oral communication situation and did not have an autonomous status; they merely continued and extended oral communication and were just an auxiliary part of the communicative act.

The diachronic development of the birch-bark letters also has two sides to it. The letters grew increasingly independent from both Church Slavonic literacy and oral discourse over time. As writing on birch bark spread in ever-wider social circles, the ties to Church Slavonic literacy weakened. This trend is reflected in the development of the formulaic expressions and the temporary spread of the use of everyday orthography.[66]

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[62] Gippius 2012.

[63] Cf. Gippius 2009, 291: '"Zrelyj" formuljar berestnjanoj perepiski otražaet uže kačestvenno inoe vosprijatie pis'mennogo teksta i možet byt' ponjat kak rezul'tat svoego roda "ėmancipacii" pis'mennogo vyskazyvanija, priobrete-nija im avtonomnogo kommunikativnogo statusa' ('The "mature" form of birch-bark correspondence reflects a qualitatively different perception of the written word and can be interpreted as a result of some kind of "emancipati-on" of the written word, as it has acquired an autonomous status').

[64] Gippius 2012.

[65] Gippius 2012, 248 and passim.

[66] Zaliznjak 2002, 607–610. Also see section 1.1 above.

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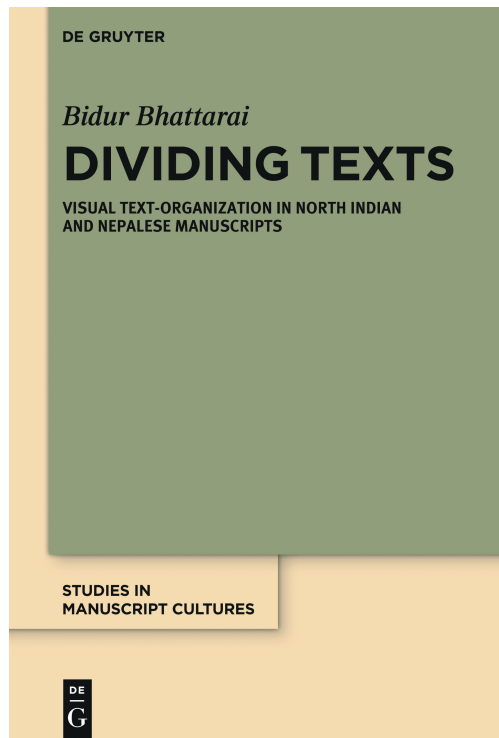
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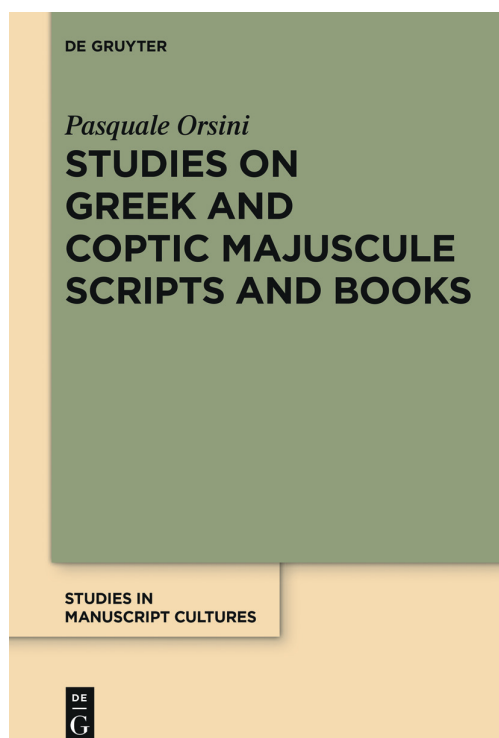
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**DE GRUYTER**

*Bidur Bhattarai*

# DIVIDING TEXTS

VISUAL TEXT-ORGANIZATION IN NORTH INDIAN
AND NEPALESE MANUSCRIPTS

**STUDIES IN
MANUSCRIPT CULTURES**

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**DE GRUYTER**

*Pasquale Orsini*

# STUDIES ON GREEK AND COPTIC MAJUSCULE SCRIPTS AND BOOKS

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