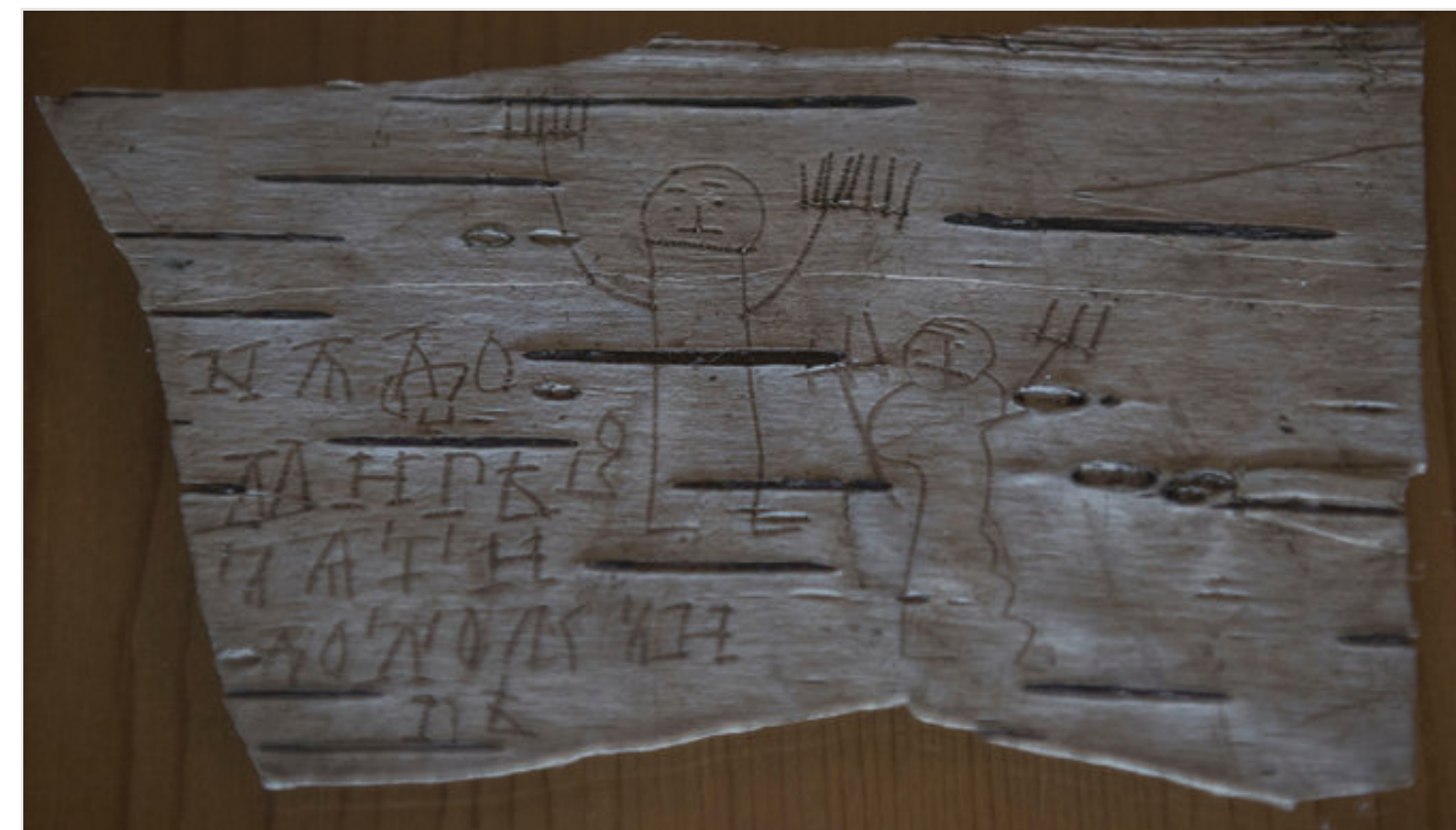


Where Mud Is Archaeological Gold, Russian History Grew on Trees

Photo



A boy left a message and drawing on a birch scroll in Old Novgorod language, a precursor to Russian. The scroll was dug from the preservative mud of Veliky Novgorod. Credit Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

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VELIKY NOVGOROD, Russia — The note, from father to son, was the sort of routine shopping list that today would be dashed off on a smartphone. In 14th century [Russia](#), it was etched into the bark of a birch tree and curled into a scroll.

“Send me a shirt, towel, trousers, reins, and, for my sister, send fabric,” the father, whose name was Onus, wrote to his son, Danilo, the block letters of Old Novgorod language, a precursor to Russian, neatly carved into the wood with a stylus. Onus ended with a bit of humor. “If I am alive,” he wrote, “I will pay for it.”

The scroll and a dozen others like it were among the finds from this year’s digging season, adding to [a collection of more than 1,000 birch-bark documents](#) uncovered here after being preserved for hundreds of years in the magical mud that makes this city one of the most extraordinary archaeological sites on earth. “Novgorod for Russia is like Pompeii for Italy,” said Pyotr G. Gaidukov, the deputy director of the Russian Academy of Sciences Institute of Archaeology. “Only Novgorod is still alive.”

Photo



The archeologist Sergei Yazikov at the digging site, where labels marked different centuries. Credit Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

Written in conversational language, on everyday topics, the birch-bark documents provide a remarkable human soundtrack to accompany a vast — and still growing — trove of artifacts including coins, official seals, kitchenware, jewelry and clothing. Each year, thousands of items are found amid buildings and streets, once paved with wooden logs, buried in the soil.

There are records of business transactions, demands for payment of debts, inventories of goods, accusations of crimes, convoluted discussions of legal disputes, personal letters among family and friends, even love letters. “Marry me,” a man named Mikita wrote to a woman named Anna in a birch-bark letter dated to between 1280 and 1300. “[I want you, and you me.](#)”

Archaeologists say the documents, once deciphered by linguists, breathe life into all of their other findings. “They open a road for us, a window in the everyday life and relations,” said Sergei Yazikov, who led a dig on Bolshaya Moskovskaya Street where many of this year’s birch writings were found. “The people of ancient Novgorod are talking to us through these scrolls.”

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X CLOSE

Nestled in a curve of the Volkhov River, with the crenelated brick walls of its Kremlin-fortress and the sparkling gold and silver domes of its churches, Veliky Novgorod looks like the setting of a medieval fairy tale.

In a way, it was.

The city was founded, according to legend, by Rurik, a Varangian chieftain, in 859. It is a place where democracy once flourished, where benevolent princes ruled with the consent of a parliament of local elites called the Veche, where markets hummed and international trade thrived, where women were empowered to participate in business and other aspects of public life.

It was a place where children began attending school around the year 1030. Among the most poignant of the birch documents are writings by a boy named Onfim, believed to be 6 or 7 years old. Dated to around 1260, they included school exercises and doodles. In one drawing, Onfim seems to envision himself as a warrior, writing his own name next to a [figure on horseback](#) who has slain an adversary. In another, there is a four-legged creature with a tail, and the words, “[I, beast.](#)”

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In an interview in his office, the city’s mayor, Yuri I. Bobryshev, glowed with pride as he described its history as a major trading post of the medieval [Hanseatic League](#), with strong ties to the European centers of Lubeck, Bruges, Ghent and London.

“It was a union of merchants and the decisions taken by that union were unconditionally carried out by the rulers of all European states,” Mr. Bobryshev said, adding with a sly smile, “Of course, at that time there was no trace of the United States.”

He then boasted about Novgorod’s role, along with Kiev, as one of the two principal cities of Kievan Rus — the original Russian Federation — adding that Moscow could lay no claim to national prominence until Ivan III made it the capital in the 15th century.

“That’s why we speak of Novgorod as the motherland of Russia,” Mr. Bobryshev said. “In Novgorod, the first customs office appeared. The ruble appeared in Novgorod. The first school was in Novgorod, in 1030 by Yaroslav the Wise, our Novgorod prince. It was founded not only for the children from rich families, but for everyone. So Novgoroders were absolutely literate people in the Middle Ages.”

“It’s not something I made up,” he said. “Here, I move to the subject of archaeology: all of this has been confirmed by findings.”

Photo



Pyotr G. Gaidukov, the deputy director of the Russian Academy of Sciences Institute of Archaeology, with newly found birch scripts. Credit Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

The city and its outskirts are dotted with excavation sites, including the Troitsky dig, which has been underway since the 1970s. The first birch-bark scrolls were found in 1951. At the huge pit on Bolshaya Moskovskaya Street, which yielded some of the most important finds this summer, Mr. Yazikov bounded down a ramp, descending through hundreds of years of Russian history (with every few steps). Small white pieces of paper marked the layers in the soil corresponding to the different centuries.

Coins, seals and jewelry point to a merchant's home being on the site for much of its history. There is evidence that in the 10th century the area was mostly used for gardens and an apple orchard. In the 12th century, the city was flourishing, with evidence of large wooden buildings. Experts say the wet, clay soil that lies under Novgorod, and contains little or no oxygen, has the unusual chemical quality that preserves both hard artifacts made of metal and items made of softer material like leather.

[Jos Schaeken](#), the dean of Leiden University College The Hague, who is a professor of Slavic and Baltic languages, said that Novgorod had not received sufficient notice in the West given its importance to archaeologists, linguists and historians.

“It is revolutionary in the sense that it gives you inside knowledge of a medieval city that had international ties with the East and the West, how it was organized and functioned, and how people communicated with each other,” he said. The birch-bark documents date from the 1000s through the 1400s, when paper became more readily available.

In Russia, Novgorod is the place where archaeology students hope to apprentice and professionals seek to make their careers. And the newest birch-bark findings often create a sensation, with hundreds of students and members of the general public [attending lectures](#) by Prof. Andrey A. Zaliznyak, a noted linguist, at Moscow State University, summing up the major discoveries.

Dmitri Sitchinava, a linguist who has attended the lectures for the past decade, said they were a theatrical event attracting hordes of fans, professionals and amateurs alike. “We have the voices of people who lived a thousand or so years ago, and they have exactly the same issues to discuss as we do,” he said.

But Mr. Sitchinava said that medieval Novgorod was idealized, and the archaeological findings proved this to be the case. “There is a conception that the early medieval Russia was much more European,” he said, adding that there was an idea that Novgorod then “was kind of like a paradise lost. It is presented as a democratic or republican alternative lost during the Middle Ages.”

But, he said: “We know there were slaves, there were serfs in old Novgorod. There were some political troubles, and the democracy was very, very different from what we understand now. But this myth lives and it’s very vital. It fosters the interest in this place.”