

The Birchbark Letters in Time and Space

0. Over seven hundred birchbark documents have been recovered in Novgorod and a few other cities. They range in time from the first half of the eleventh century to the second half of the fifteenth, a period of some 450 years.¹ Not surprisingly, some of the linguistic and stylistic features of these documents change over time. The present article will examine one particular example of such change and see what it can tell us about the changing social and spatial orientation (in a sense which will become clear) of medieval Novgorod. In other words, we shall begin with a linguistic microanalysis and make a speculative, but I hope not purely imaginative leap to socio-economic macrohistory.

1. Our primary data concerns incipits, the formulaic opening phrases, of the Novgorod letters, - the Dear Sir's and *Глубокоуважаемый коллега's* of their day.² The incipits investigated here begin with *грамота*, the sign of the cross, *челобитие*, *приказ*, *покланяние*, and *поклон*, for example, *грамота ѿъ жиэномира къ микуле* (#109, 1096-1116),³ † ѿ сьмъка къ коулотъкъ. (#105, 1134-1161), *чолобитыѣ ѿ есиѣа брату своему фомѣ* (#129, 1396-1409), *приказъ косарикѣ ѿ есиѣа* (#144, 1313-1340), ѿ дровича ѿ папа пѣкланяние ко демеѣну (#87, 1177-1197), *поклоно ѿ подвоискаго ко ѿилипу* (#147, 1224-1238). The chronological distribution of these incipits is shown in Figures 1 and 2 below.

On the left (upper) side of the temporal scale of Figure 1, the dots connected by solid lines represent the distribution of the incipit *грамота*, while the dotted line shows that of the initial cross. On the right (lower) side, the X's connected by a solid line show the distribution of incipits in *челобитие*, *челом бую* etc. and the dash-connected X's that of incipits beginning in *приказъ*. Obviously, incipits in *грамота* and the sign of the cross are, in general, archaic (*грамота* occurring before 1225 and the cross also primarily in this early period, but extending to the early 14th c.),⁴ while incipits in *приказъ* and *челобитие* etc. are, generally, innovative (extended from the beginning of the 14th century to the latter fifteenth).

Figure (2) shows the equivalent distribution of *покланяние* and *поклонъ*. In spite of some overlap at the chronological edge, the

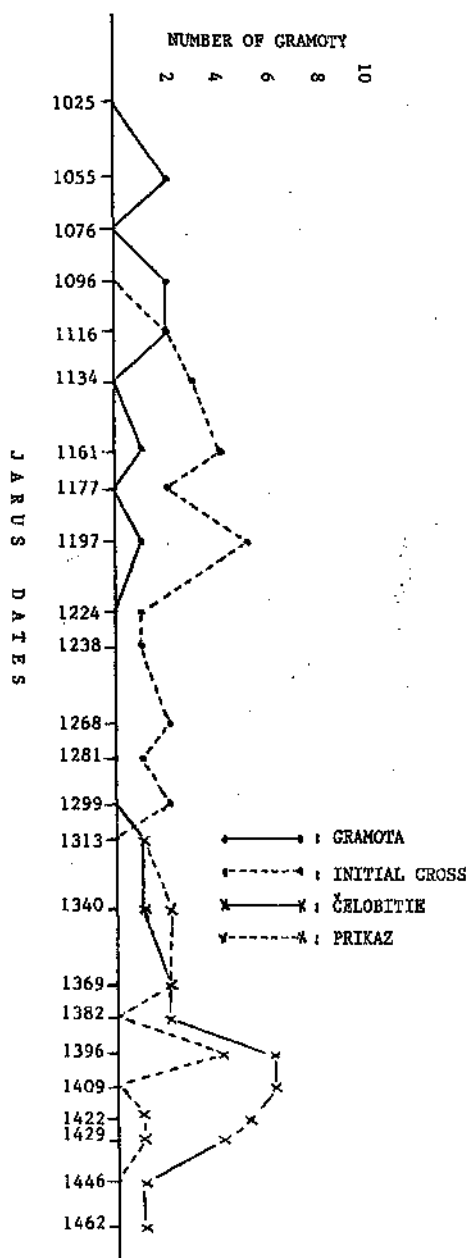


Figure 1

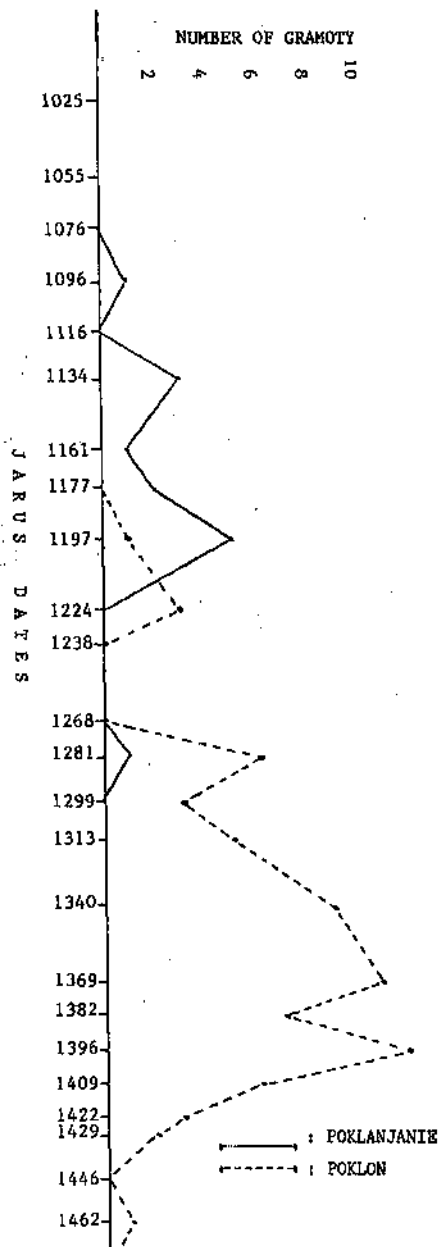


Figure 2

distribution is clear: the Church Slavonic *покланяние* is concentrated before the mid-13th century, while *поклонъ* occurs primarily thereafter. In other words, incipits in *покланяние*, like those with *грамота* or with an initial cross are archaic, while those in *поклон*, like those without a cross and in *приказъ* or *челобитие* are innovatory.

The data of Figures (1) and (2) can be combined into a single table, showing the distribution of archaic (with the cross, *грамота*, and *покланяние*) and innovatory (with *челобитие*, *приказъ*, and *поклонъ*) incipits, as in Figure 3 below.

In spite of some slight overlap, the border between the archaic and the innovatory features falls unambiguously in the mid thirteenth-century: 86.9% of the occurrences of archaic features are before mid-century and 96.3% of the innovatory occurrences are after it. The first occurrence of an innovatory feature falls in 1197 and the last occurrence of an archaic feature in 1299; the midpoint between these two dates, 1248, can be taken as a convenient though obviously artificial border between the two stylistic periods.⁵

2.1 The fact that the border between the archaic and the innovatory incipit types occurs at approximately 1248 acquires further significance when we examine the differing numbers of birchbark letters recovered from different chronological layers of the Novgorod excavations. There are twenty-four such dendrochronologically dated layers (*ярусъ*), ranging from the second quarter of the eleventh century to the last third of the fifteenth. Figure (4) below shows the average number of birchbark documents per year recovered from each of these layers.⁶

As would be expected, the number of recovered documents climbs gradually from the early eleventh to the early thirteenth centuries, from less than one tenth to nearly two and a half documents per year. Then, in mid-thirteenth century, the frequency plunges to barely over half a document per year; that is, the frequency of written communication drops to barely over a quarter (28%) of the average frequency of the preceding sixty years. Thereafter, in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, the frequency of letter-writing increases by a factor of three, averaging some 1.85 documents per year over the next forty-five years. The mid-thirteenth century seems to have been a period of what we might call epistolary crisis, during which the correspondence level drops back to where it had been something like a hundred and fifty years before.

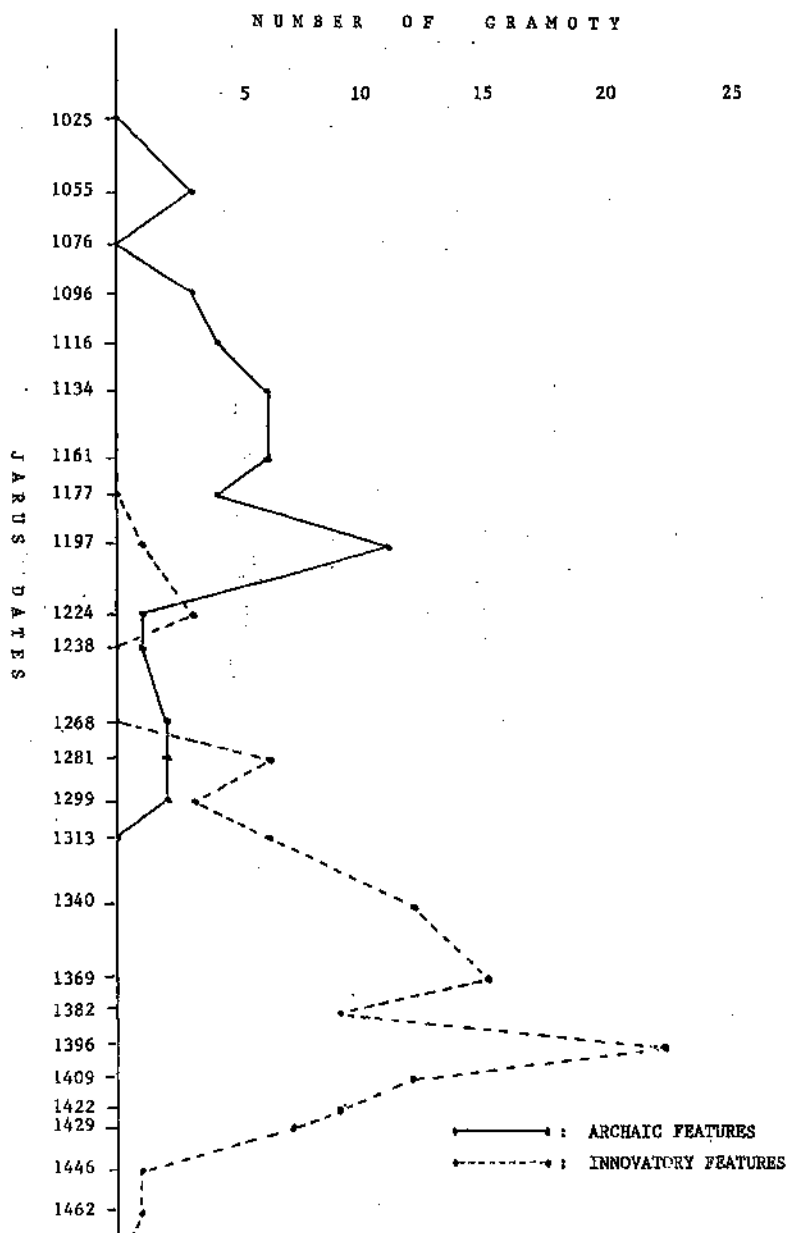


Figure 3

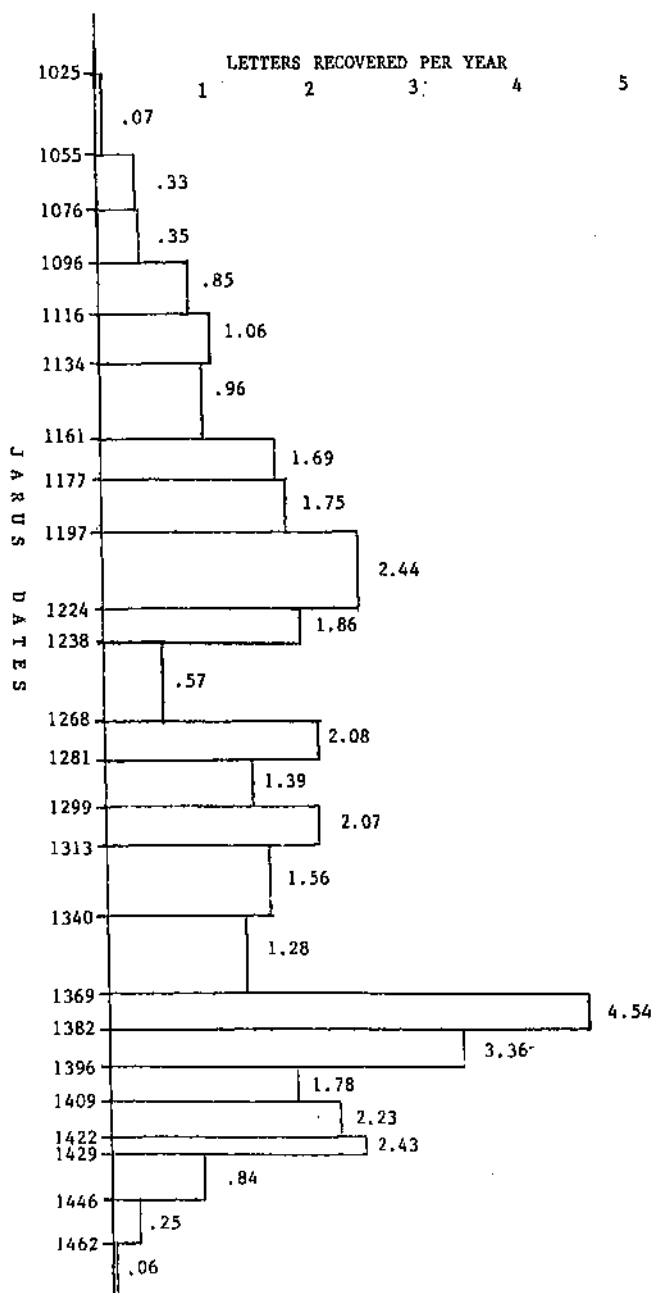


Figure 4

It is, of course, only an assumption that the number of recovered documents can be used to measure the numbers of letters actually written during a given period. It is conceivable, for example, though it does not seem likely, that demographic and climactic factors could have had a substantial effect on the number of documents written and preserved from any given period. That this assumed correlation is not unreasonable is supported by corroborative evidence from another kind of literate activity preserved from medieval Novgorod, namely, the writing of chronicles.

2.2 The activity level of chronicle writing can be measured, at least in a rough partial way, by the length of the yearly entries.⁷ Figure 5 below shows the length of the entries for consecutive five-year periods in the Synodal Copy of the First Novgorod Chronicle, from the photocopy in Dietze (1971) of Nasonov (1950).

As was the case with the letter-writing plotted in Figure 4, chronicle activity is at first intermittent and light, gradually increasing through the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Then, roughly at mid-century, there is a sudden decrease in the length of the yearly entries. In the five-year period 1246-1250, there are altogether only eight lines of text, with 1248 having no entry at all (recall that for the birchbark letters the border between the archaic and innovative incipit periods was also precisely 1248). Not since 1121 had there been a year for which no events were recorded, and not since 1104 had there been a sequence of five years with fewer than ten lines of text (six lines for the period 1100-1104). In other words, the level of chronicle activity in the mid-thirteenth century drops to that of one hundred fifty years earlier. The striking similarity between Figures 4 and 5 can hardly be due to chance alone: the mid-thirteenth century was clearly a time when not much was written, a period, as it were, of cultural stagnation. Why?

3. Only two factors could bring about such a striking reduction in "literary" activity: either there were fewer people engaged in writing, or those who were so engaged had less to write about. In fact, and while bearing in mind that there can be no certain answers to a question like this, both factors appear to have played a role. A frost in the Spring of 1230 killed most of the crops in Novgorod and led to a famine so dreadful that several thousand died of hunger⁸ and additional multitudes moved to other cities.⁹ It is obvious that for the next few decades there would be few people to send or receive letters or to participate in the local political infighting or booty raids against neighboring tribes that comprised most of the material

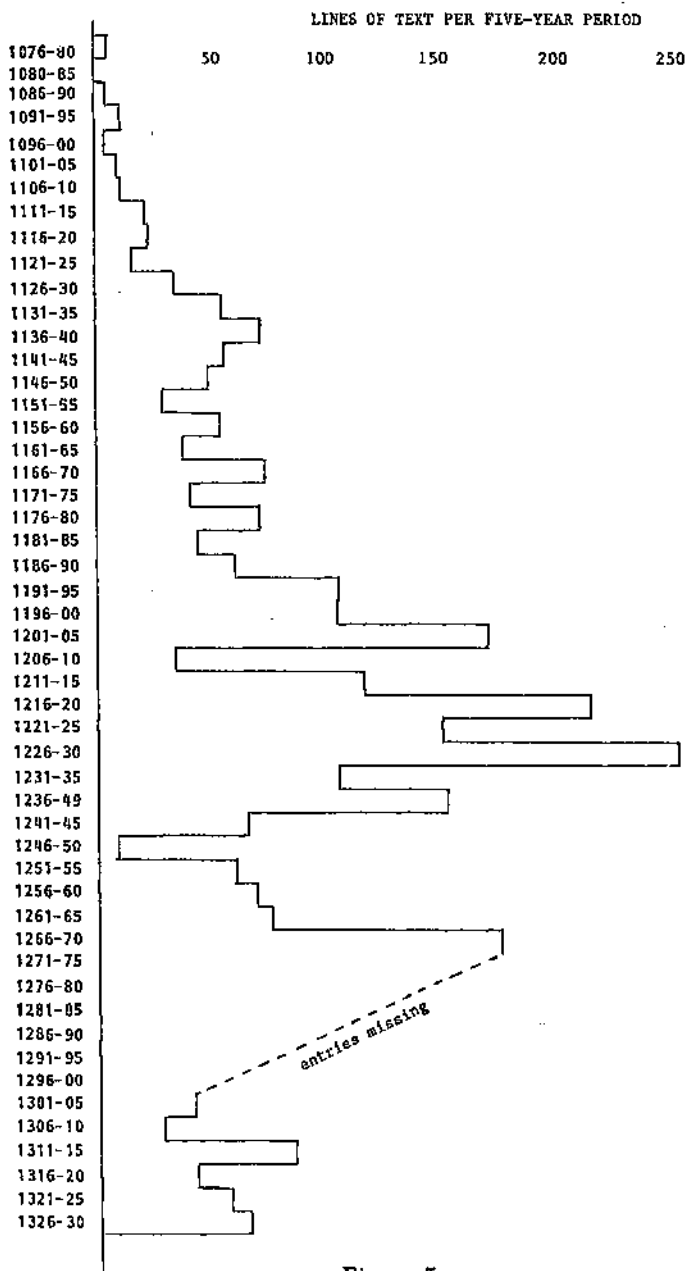


Figure 5

for the early chronicle entries. But it was not only local events that caused problems: the Tatar devastation of 1237-1240, although Novgorod itself was physically spared, laid waste to so much of the Russian lands and destroyed so much of the Russian population that the Novgorod economy could hardly have not been affected. Most of the birchbark letters are commercial documents of one sort or another, and even the survivors of the 1230 famine must have functioned in a stagnant economy, one in which there was little cause for correspondence. In addition, although the chronicle does not mention this directly, Novgorod must have been forced to pay taxes to the Horde, an additional burden on an already weak economy. Finally, it was precisely at mid-century that Prince Alexander ("Nevskij") of Novgorod had to spend four full years at Batyj's Tatar headquarters,¹⁰ leaving his city-state without the leadership that might have generated activity worthy of mention in the chronicle. We can conclude that the reduced levels of letter-and chronicle-writing at mid-century were the result of much-reduced population level, a stagnant economy, and lack of energetic leadership.

4. So far, we have observed that the mid-thirteenth century was the time of an extraordinary reduction in letter-and chronicle-writing and have attributed this to the 1230 famine and the Tatar invasion of 1237-1240. Let us now recall that it was shown in section 1 above that when birchbark correspondence resumed after this period of crisis, it did so with a different set of stylistic conventions (челобитие, приказъ, поклонъ for older грамота and покланяние). Let us now turn to the spatial dimension of our investigation: what do these chronological facts tell us about the spatial orientation of Novgorod society before and after the crisis period?

The switch in incipits documented in figures (2) and (3) suggests two preliminary hypotheses. First, the genetically Old Church Slavonic покланяние (vs. East Slavic поклонъ) and the presence of the initial cross, both archaic features, are at the same time religious features, that is, they suggest Church influence even on this rather superficial formal level, an influence doubtless due to the fact that it was priests who taught people to read and write. Second, while the older birchbark letters begin with the socially neutral грамота or покланяние/поклонъ in the neutral meaning 'greeting', the later letters use the socially hierarchal челобитие 'petition' (or челомъ бую etc.) and приказъ 'order', that is, the former egalitarian greeting has been replaced by one which formalized the master-servant relationship. Here it is apposite to note that the Novgorod Chronicle, which in the early XIIIth c. still reflects the interests of the вече and the меньшие люди, moves toward a boyar viewpoint as the century progresses;¹¹ this is a

century of an increasingly hierarchized society. If we assume, as some historians do, that the term *челобитие* itself refers to a custom which was not Slavic, but Tatar, we may surmise that the appearance of this term in the early fourteenth century is a distant stylistic reflection of the subordination of Rus' to the Horde. This in turn suggests a spatial reorientation of Novgorod's interests from purely local and regional matters (battles with the Oud', relations with Pskov, etc.) to a broader political perspective.

A spatial reorientation of Novgorod society is supported by two additional kinds of textual evidence. For one thing, the thirteenth-century shift from one to another set of incipits is not all that changes in the Russian language at this time. Zaliznjak has shown that it was roughly in this same period that a number of local Novgorod (in some cases, more broadly North Great Russian) dialect features in the birchbark letters give way to more widespread Old and Middle Russian features such as were prevalent in the Vladimir'-Suzdal' region, including Moscow. These local features include the lack of the second and third velar palatalizations (*къль* for *цль* 'whole', *вхоу* for *вьсю*), nom.sing.masc. o-stems in *-e* instead of *-ъ* (*дале Варлааме* instead of *далъ варлаамъ*), loss of the *-в* in *-вл*-clusters (*Ярослаль* for *Ярославль*), etc.¹² In other words, the thirteenth century was a time of linguistic reorientation from local to "national" (or, at least, to generalized Vladimir'-Suzdal'-Moscow) standards, a development which is usually attributed to Muscovite hegemony of a much later period.

Second, this linguistic "nationalization" was itself only part of a much broader political reorientation from primarily local, Novgorodian concerns toward the much broader concerns of the Northeastern principalities, prime among which was of course the presence of the Tatar Horde. This reorientation is clearly reflected in the Novgorod Chronicle; as Lichačev puts it,

"Начало XIII в. приносит существенный перелом в новгородском летописании. К XIII в. значительно расширяется обычная тематика летописных записей. Летописца начинают интересоваться событиями вне стен его родного города. Появляется понятие русской земли, до того почти совершенно отсутствовавшее в новгородском летописании. Этот интерес новгородского летописания к общерусским событиям возникает в связи с политикой Новгородского князя Мстислава Удалого, вмешавшего Новгород в дела северо-восточных княжеств. Последующая зависимость Новгорода от северо-восточных

княжеств окончательно закрепляет внимание летописца к общерусским событиям.¹³

That is, Novgorod became involved with and then dependent on the Northeastern principalities, just as these latter were dependent on the Tatars.

5. We can conclude that the distribution across time of even such minor stylistic facts as epistolary incipits in *покланяние*, *поклонъ*, *грамота*, *челобитие*, *приказъ*, and the cross can point directly toward a major social and spatial reorientation of Novgorod society, from one which was inward-directed, relatively egalitarian, and in which the religious element affected even stylistic detail, to one which was socially hierarchal and in which the center of spatial attention was exocentric, namely the Northeastern principalities of Vladimir'-Suzdal' (later, Moscow) and in general the русская земля in its subordinated and tormented relations with the Tatar horde.

Notes

- 1 For the most recent printed survey, see Janin-Zaliznjak 1986, 7-8.
- 2 This data represents an updated version, including 74 new letters in Zaliznjak 1986, of part of the material collected in Worth 1983.
- 3 The birchbark documents have been dated by dendrochronology and other reasonably precise methods (Janin-Zaliznjak 1986, 3-7); where precise dating of individual documents was impossible, they have been assigned dates in a manner described in Worth 1986, 787-792.
- 4 Document #576 is given by Janin-Zaliznjak 1986, 41-42 as beginning with the sign of the cross, but we have not counted it as such here, since the cross is app. one centimeter above and three centimeters to the left of the first letter of the document (an *azbuka*), whereas in all other cases the cross precedes the first letter immediately, with no space. An opening cross as late as #576, which is dated to the 1420s, would also be unique among the documents retrieved so far.
- 5 As was noted in Worth 1983, 329-330, the earlier birchbark letters show Church Slavonic features (the cross, *покланяние*) absent from the

later letters (no cross, поклонъ), and thus provide some minor evidence supporting the Šachmatov rather than the Obnorskij view of the origins of literary Russian.

- 6 This data is an updated version, including the 74 new documents published in Janin-Zaliznjak 1986, of the analysis given in Worth 1986; details on dating and correlation of documents from different sites are given there. The horizontal axis shows the time covered by each layer and the vertical axis the average number of documents recovered per year from it, and the volume above each layer the total number of documents recovered from it.
- 7 That this measure is only a rather coarse approximation is obvious. Very long entries for some years are due to imported tales (e.g., of the capture of Constantinople s.a. 1204 or of the Tatar sack of Rjazan' s.a. 1238), entries may have been expanded or contracted by later scribes copying the original, and, of course, more things simply happen in some years than in others.
- 8 Exact numbers are unavailable, but Archbishop Spiridon ordered three mass burial pits to be constructed, the first of which alone held 3030 corpses, and all three of which together were inadequate to their grisly task ("И кто не прослызится о семь, видяще мъртвѣца по улицамъ лежаща, и младѣнца отъ пѣсъ издаемы", Dietze 1971, 200; s.a.1230).
- 9 "И разидеся градъ нашъ и волость наша, и полни быша чюжии гради и страны братье нашей и сестръ", Dietze 1971, 199.
- 10 He left Novgorod in 1246 ("Поѣха князь Олександръ въ Татары") and returned only in 1250 ("Приѣха князь Олександръ изъ Орды, и бысть радость велика въ Новѣгородѣ") Dietze 1971, 209-210. It is worth noting that the year 1248, which was so prominent a date in our discussion of incipit types and of chronicle activity above, falls precisely in the middle of Alexander's absence from Novgorod.
- 11 Lichačev 1945, 41-42.
- 12 Zaliznjak 1982a, Janin-Zaliznjak 1986.
- 13 Lichačev 1945, 40.

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