Paired Birds and Clauses: Birch-Bark Letter no. 837

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In his insightful book, *How Russian Came to Be the Way It Is* (Nesset 2015), Tore Nesset writes:

> Emphasizing the importance of interpretation and hypothesis testing, I hope to have convinced you that historical linguistics is not just something you read about in books, but also something you do. (305)

The present essay is a modest attempt to offer some interpretations and to test some hypotheses by bringing together language and visual art in a single narrative that unfolds like a small detective story.

Among the Novgorodian birch-bark documents, the fragmentary birch-bark letter no. 837 stands out. On stratigraphic grounds, it is dated to 1140–1160.

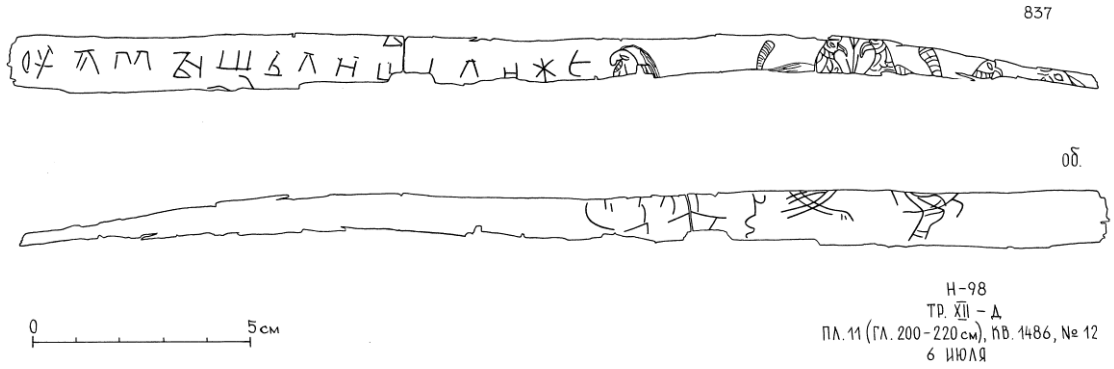


Figure 1. Birch-bark letter no. 837

V. L. Janin, A. A. Zaliznjak, and A. A. Gippius offer the following comment on this find:

> Although the surviving fragment of text is extremely small, it does not sound like a line from an ordinary birch-bark document of a business nature. Entirely unusual is the presence of a drawing next to the text (the only analogy here being the birch-bark documents of the boy Onfim). It cannot therefore be excluded that in this case a certain artistic text was written on the birch-bark sheet, embellished with an illustration or some sort of vignettes (it is less likely that this was, on the contrary, a picture

Slovo 66:1 (2026), 46–56. DOI https://doi.org/10.33063/slovo.v66i1.1231
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accompanied by a text, since the text is located to the left of the image). (Janin et al. 2004: 55. Translation is mine — M.K.)

To the best of my knowledge, this birch-bark letter has not been subjected to a more dedicated analysis in scholarly literature. The following discussion therefore focuses on both its visual and verbal components.

The context

Indeed, this is not an ordinary birch-bark document. Birch-bark letters containing drawings are very rare. The most famous examples are the drawings of the boy Onfim, such as his dramatic appeal "*г*[*оспод*]*и помози рабу своєму онѳиму*" ('O Lord, help your servant Onfim') in birch-bark letter no. 203 (mid-thirteenth century), accompanied by an expressive image of a boy addressing God.[1]

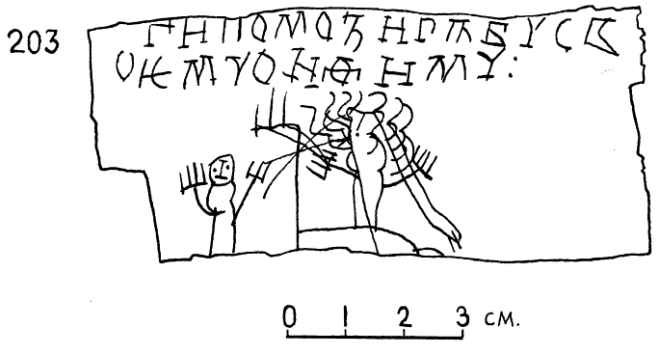


Figure 2. Birch-bark letter no. 203

Birch-bark letter no. 957 (early twelfth century), written by a certain Shevko, is more relevant for the present argument. There, an apotropaic curse is accompanied by two drawings that are compositionally opposed to one another. While the text of this birch-bark letter has been analyzed in detail by Janin et al. (2015) and Gippius & Sičinava (2021), the drawings themselves appear not to have received focused attention, although their connection to the protective formula cannot be excluded.

> *воибоудино лоукъньчо иже е ѫкльдеть да проклѧтъ боудеоуть*
> *а шьвъко ѱлъ*
> 'Voybuda's little basket. Whoever steals it, may they be cursed.
> Written by Shevko.'

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, images of birch-bark letters, their texts, and translations are taken from gramoty.ru.

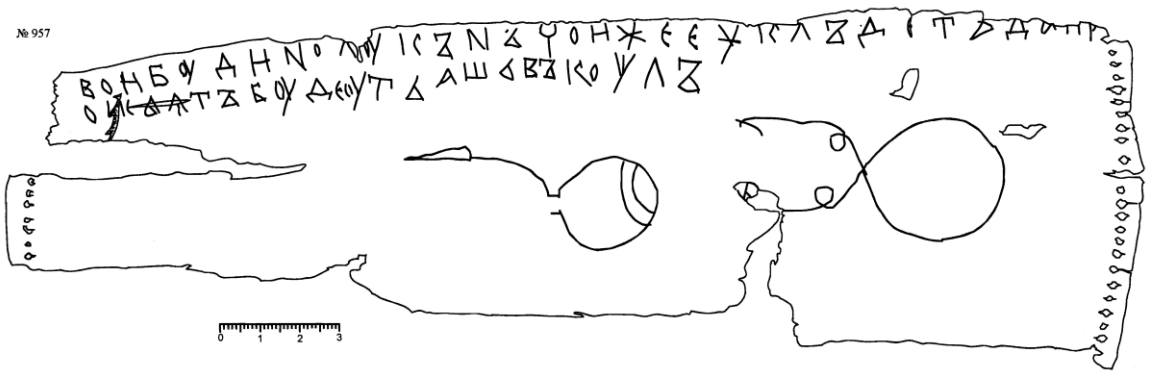


Figure 3. Birch-bark letter no. 957

Birch-bark letter no. 955, dated to the first half or middle of the twelfth century, offers the closest parallel: it combines a drawing of a crowned bride and a more crudely rendered groom in an Orthodox wedding ceremony with a folkloric fertility formula (see Collins 2011)

пеи пизда//и сѣкыле
'Let the vagina drink and the clitoris.'

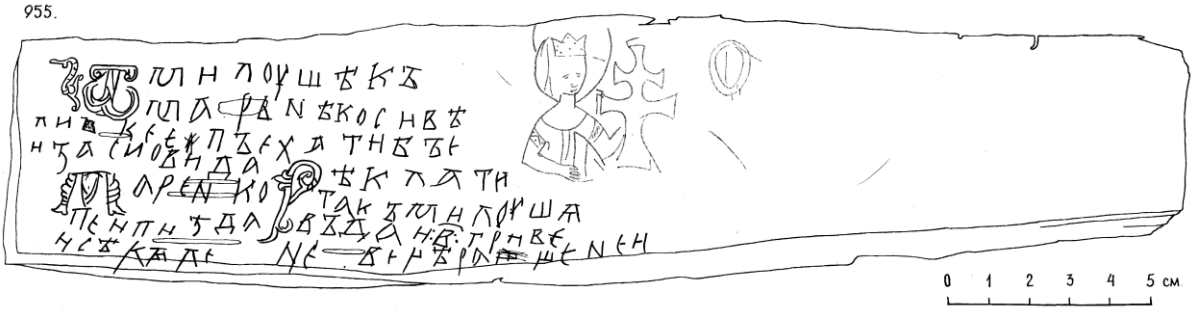


Figure 4. Birch-bark letter no. 955

Birch-bark letter no. 837 examined in this essay also preserves fragments of drawings, at least two of which are arranged in compositionally opposed positions. This suggests that here, too, the combination of image and text may have served a specific function.

Visual analysis

The surviving fragments indicate that the drawings were executed with care and a high degree of detail. This was probably not a quick, utilitarian sketch (for example, one made by a hunter conveying information rapidly), but rather a document produced for a specific purpose. Insofar as interpretation is possible, the fragments depict birds. I describe them in order of appearance from left to right.

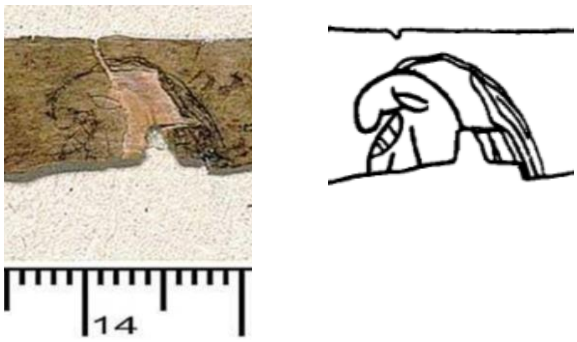


Figure 5. 13.7–14.7 cm from the left edge[2]

The fragment is poorly preserved and does not allow for a precise interpretation. Hypothetically, one may discern a round head (without ear tufts) with mottled plumage and a facial disk—possibly a fragment of an owl.[3]

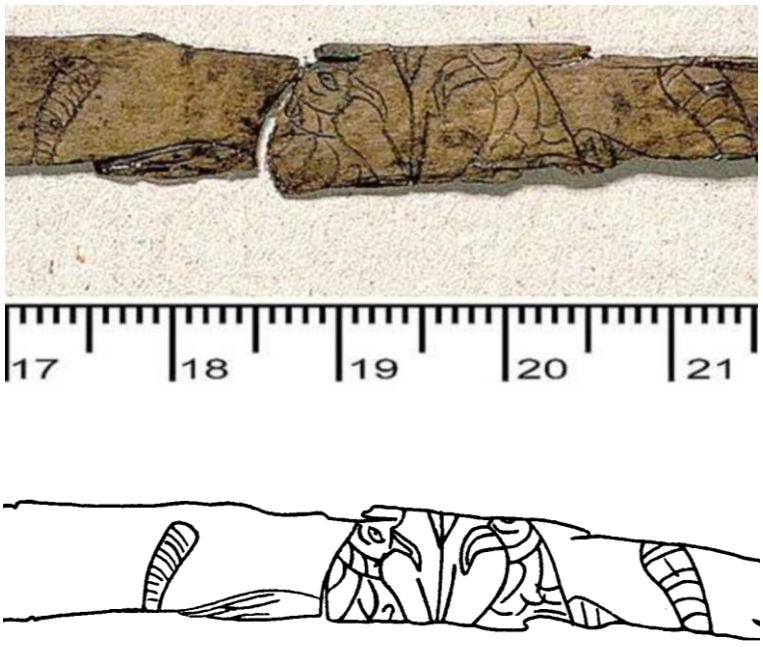


Figure 6. 17–21.5 cm from the left edge

This is the best-preserved fragment. Two birds form a compositional pair, separated by what appears to be either a vegetal ornament or—less likely—a water source (fountain). Both birds have long, curved beaks; the left bird has an open eye; the right bird's eye is closed. On the left bird, a line resembling the beginning of a crest is visible. Clearly delineated strong wings lie along the back but are not oriented downward as in birds of

[2] Both color photographs and black-and-white line drawings are presented for ease of interpretation.
[3] I sincerely thank the professional ornithologist and philologist Dr. Dmytro Klymenko for his valuable consultations.

prey. The demonstratively vertical position of the tails and the differences in the rendering of tail feathers (possibly indicated by narrow lines) point to sexual or age-related dimorphism. The mottled plumage and feather "collars" are characteristic of Columbidae (e.g. doves, pigeons) or Galliformes (e.g. hazel grouse, cock, peacock).

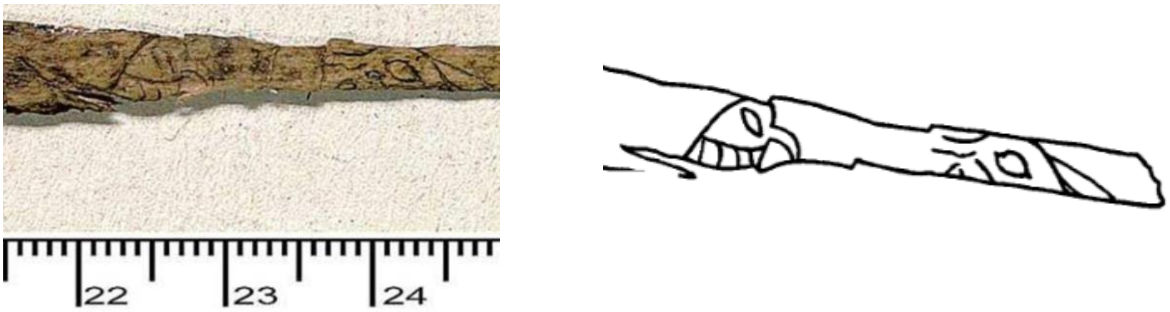


Figure 7. 21.5–24.8 cm from the left edge

This fragment is also poorly preserved. The left bird's head is clearly visible, turned from left to right. The long, curved beak and feather collar may again indicate Columbidae (pigeon, dove). Another image, to the right of the bird's head, cannot be properly identified; it may also be part of a head.

There are also fragments on the reverse side of the letter, which cannot be reconstructed at all (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Reverse side of birch-bark letter no. 837

To sum up this part, the well-preserved fragments clearly depict birds (either Galliformes or Columbidae), which are not uncommon subjects in Novgorodian birch-bark letters (Klimenko 2021). The poorly preserved fragments, although inconclusive, do not contradict an ornithological interpretation.

The Christian vs folk interpretation

When considering bird imagery in medieval Rus′, two principal contexts must be taken into account: the Byzantine and the folk traditions. These contexts, naturally, formed a system of cross-references rather than existing in isolation (Alpatov 2004; Belova, Petruchin 2008).

In eleventh- and twelfth-century Byzantium, medallions with birds (as well other animals or horsemen) arranged symmetrically, facing one another beak to beak, are

typical. Numerous examples survive in stone and textiles, where such medallions cover surfaces in a carpet-like manner[4]. There are many paired compositions on buildings, for instance, above doorways or on church slabs. Similar motifs appear in illuminated manuscripts, including ecclesiastical books. The tradition is well preserved in Old Rus′, often not merely inspired but produced by Greek masters.



Figure 9. Temple Pendant with Two Birds Flanking a Tree of Life, Kyivan Rus', ca. 1000–1200, (Metropolitan Museum of Art, object no. 17.190.679)



Figure 10. The Svyatoslav Miscellany (fragment), Kyivan Rus', 1073. (The State Historical Museum, Moscow, Synodal Collection, no 1043).

The distinctly Christian symbolism of such ornaments is usually interpreted as representing the harmony of heavenly and earthly powers. Birds flanking a tree are commonly interpreted as symbols of Paradise and eternity (with the Tree of Life at the center) and as guardians of the sacred realm, performing an apotropaic function. Two doves (Columbidae) symbolize Paradise, the Eucharist, and the Resurrection; a pair of peacocks (Galliformes) drinking from a cup or fountain became associated with the rivers of Paradise and with baptism in the Jordan River.

At the same time, ornithomorphic images on material objects are widely attested in the folk tradition of medieval Rus′. As Kuznetsova notes specifically with regard to the northeastern and northwestern regions:

> In the twelfth century, new types of plate pendants emerge, in which the image of Galliformes predominates. <…> In a number of images on Old Russian hollow pendants of the eleventh–twelfth centuries, crests and pointed beaks appear. (Kuznetsova 2024: 221. Translation is mine — M.K.)

Paired ornithomorphic images are well known, for example, in pendants, bracelets, lighting devices, and various traditional ornaments. The birds may face one another or look in opposite directions; they are often separated by vegetal ornamentation. A widespread paired image of a rooster and a hen has survived in traditional East Slavic embroidery. Although medieval embroidery has survived only fragmentarily, it is assumed that similar motifs were not limited to the better-preserved metal objects of medieval material culture.

[4] I sincerely thank the professional art historian Nikolay Ivanov for his valuable consultations.



Figure 11. A pendant, 12th cent., Novgorod (Kuznetsova 2024, fig. 4:1)



Figure 12. Embroidery, 19th. cent. fragment (Sbornik 1877)

In folk culture, the symbolism of bird pairs is iconically associated with married couples, especially in wedding rituals. A pair of doves symbolizes harmony and is a popular motif representing the bride and groom. A rooster and hen likewise appear frequently in wedding symbolism (on ritual towels and in elements of clothing) as signs of fidelity, prosperity, and the orderly life of a new household.

Thus, the visual evidence does not justify a clear binary choice between a Christian and a folk interpretation. Symmetrical birds separated by a vegetal element belong to the Byzantine and Rus′ visual repertoire.

Again, a strong parallel for this combination of Orthodox and folk traditions is provided by birch-bark letter no. 955 (see Fig. 4), which has been interpreted by Collins (2011) as a matchmaking document and whose format and ornamentation have been shown to imitate manuscript conventions. This birch-bark letter demonstrates that a text could participate in a living social ritual while also borrowing visually "bookish" devices. For the present investigation, then, the safest claim is that the imagery strongly supports a likely ritualized reading, while the exact symbolic coding of the paired birds remains open.

Textual analysis

The surviving fragments of the images suggest that the original document was at least three times wider, assuming the birds were drawn in full. Therefore, we may conclude that the text originally contained at least two or three additional lines, although its total length cannot be reconstructed. The preserved text consists of five complete words and, most likely, a fragment of a sixth, the digraph *оу* 'u':

оу	*а*	*мы*	*шьли*	*ш[ь]ли*	*же*
	Conj	1PL	walk-PRF.PL	walk-PRF.PL	PART

'… and we went went also/then'

In our previous research (Kopotev et al. 2024), we cautiously suggested that this fragment might belong to what we termed "reduplicative constructions with lexical

repetitions", which are a widespread syntactic feature of East Slavic folklore texts and can plausibly be reconstructed for earlier stages as well.

А мы просо сеяли, сеяли.
А мы просо вытопчем, вытопчем, etc.
'And we sowed millet, sowed it.
And we will trample the millet, trample it, etc.'
(A round-dance song from the wedding cycle)

Летят, летят тридцать три ворона, несут, несут тридцать три каменя.
Садились эти вороны на гороцку, на гороцку, etc.
'They fly, they fly—thirty-three ravens; they carry, they carry thirty-three stones.
These ravens settled on a little hill, on the hill, etc.'
(Incantation against infant convulsions and other illnesses)

These parallels would allow us to interpret the syntactic structure of the fragment as belonging to a folkloric text of the same type: a magic formula, possibly from the wedding cycle. There is, however, a serious linguistic objection to this interpretation. According to Wackernagel's Law, as adapted by Zaliznjak, the unstressed particle *že* is a first-rank enclitic that must follow the first phonetic word of the clause (Zaliznjak 2008, 28–29). Even if one treats *šli šli* ("walked, walked") as a serial verb occupying a single syntactic position (cf. Russian *žili-byli*, lit. "lived-were"), the particle *že* would still have to follow the first stressed word: *a my že šli šli* ("and we *že* walked and walked"). By contrast, serial-verb constructions with postposed *že*, such as the hypothetical **a my šli šli že* ("and we walked and walked *že*"), are unattested.

At the same time, constructions in which *že* functions as a connective (*skrepa*, in Zaliznjak's terminology), linking two adjacent clauses, are well attested in both Novgorodian birch-bark letters and bookish language.

продавъше дворъ // идите ***же*** *сѣмо*
'Having sold the homestead, come here.'
(Birch-bark letter no 424)

добыво серебра // присоли ***же***
'Obtain silver and send it.'
(Birch-bark letter no 436)

More importantly, this *že*-construction regularly involves the repetition of the same word, but the repeated words clearly belong to two separate clauses. This type is attested in both Old Novgorodian letters and Church Slavonic texts from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries onward:

а въ томь шесть кѫно ***присъли // присъли же*** *мою ї малѫю нитокѫ*
‘For this, **sent** six *kunas* [currency]; also **sent** my short string [of pearls].’
(Birch-bark letter no 776, 1140–1160)

[*епископ*] *помянувъ, яко далече ему* [*Авраамию*] *сущу града, скорбь ему велья, да призоветь и* ***скоро // Скоро же*** *блаженный приде по повелѣнию епископа.*
‘[The bishop], having recalled that he [Avraamy] was far from the town and therefore in great distress, ordered that he be summoned **quickly. Soon** the blessed one came by the bishop’s command.’
(Life of Avraamy of Smolensk, 13th c.)

Thus, we must acknowledge that the syntactic evidence does not support interpreting the fragment in no. 837 as a reduplicative construction with lexical repetition characteristic of folkloric syntax. However, in a broader context, repetition is a recurrent organizing principle in folkloric texts in general. The examples below should be read not as syntactic parallels but as cumulative evidence that ritual or magical texts often favor repetition and iconic semantic reinforcement over the economy of ordinary discourse.

Within the corpus of birch-bark letters, thirteen documents have been identified as incantations, protective charms, or divinatory records. Almost all of them contain repetitions of lexemes or cognate words. These include repetitions of nouns (no. 330), numeral groups (no. 715), vocatives (no. 734 and 1022), and pronouns and prepositions (no. 521 and 674)[5]. Letter no. 1022 is especially telling because it combines paraphrases of the Easter Troparion with a folk incantation:

[+ *хс҃ъ*] : *въскрь съмьртию на съмьрть на-*
стоупи ***сихаилъ англ҃ъ : сихаилъ англъ***
сихаилъ анл҃ъ *: проганѧеть тѧ гд҃ь злаѧ*
болѣзни трѧсавице (1022)

‘Christ is risen, He has defeated death by His death.
Angel Sixael, angel Sixael, angel Sixael.
The Lord chases you away, evil disease, fever!’
(An incantation against fever).

Thus, it may be safely concluded that the preserved textual fragment no. 837 does not contain a reduplicative construction with lexical repetition. Rather, it should be interpreted as containing repeated lexemes in separate clauses linked by the connective *že*, a pattern attested in both bookish texts and birch-bark letters. Lexical repetition, however, is more characteristic of folkloric and ritual texts.

[5] Verbal repetition is first attested in a fifteenth-century birch-bark letter from Pereyaslavl Ryazansky, which contains an Easter verse written in Church Slavonic (Gippius & Zavjalov 2023).

Conclusion

Birch-bark letter no. 837 is far from an easy document. It is best interpreted not as a simple written note but as an artifact situated at the intersection of image, text, and social practice. The visual composition of paired birds, together with the careful execution of the drawing, suggests a planned and meaningful object rather than a rapid informal sketch. At the same time, the imagery does not permit a strict choice between Christian and folk interpretation. Symmetrical birds flanking a central element are well attested in Byzantine and Rus′ visual culture, while paired birds also belong to the symbolic repertoire of East Slavic domestic wedding traditions.

The linguistic evidence requires similar caution. The surviving verbal fragment cannot securely be treated as a reduplicative construction attested in East Slavic folklore, since the enclitic facts point instead to a more ordinary two-clause *že*-construction attested in both Novgorodian birch-bark letters and more bookish texts. Yet the broader corpus of ritual texts shows that lexical repetitions are recurrent features of charms, protective formulas, and related genres, a feature preserved in birch-bark letters and in modern folklore/ritual texts. Thus, in the wider genre-specific sense, the fragment remains compatible with folkloric interpretation.

Thus, birch-bark letter no. 837 is best understood as a vernacular ritual artifact, probably connected with wedding-related ritual practice, that draws on a visual and textual repertoire circulating across both folk and Christian traditions. A purely bookish interpretation cannot be fully excluded, but the convergence of visual composition, symbolic imagery, and the broader patterns of repetition makes the folkloric reading the more plausible one.

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