

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Iscrizioni novgorodiane su corteccia di betulla by R. Faccani

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In the last decade or so, the study of the birch bark letters has attracted a number of scholars and produced a vast amount of research. This limited corpus has not only yielded a number of interpretations pertaining to the most minute details of the texts of various letters, but has also triggered grand-scale conclusions¹ concerning Proto-Slavic and the Slavic migration into Upper Russia. Central in this development is the maestro in the field, as universally acknowledged, A.A. Zaliznjak, who has paid attention to virtually all aspects of the study of the birch bark letters, although far from all of his conclusions have been met with general agreement.² In his report to the Cracow Congress of Slavists in 1998 Zaliznjak (Зализняк 1998, 248) states that in addition to a large number of papers and articles dedicated to the study of the birch bark letters, more than ten monographs³ treating these texts have been published so far. It is of particular interest to note that a number of these monographs have been published outside Russia in several languages. One of the latest of these monographs has come out in Italy, a country much more active in the field of Slavic studies than perhaps generally perceived.⁴ The book to be reviewed here, *Iscrizioni novgorodiane su corteccia di betulla*, 'Novgorodian Inscriptions on Birch Bark', is published by the Italian scholar Remo Faccani, also known as the author of previous publications on the same subject, as a volume issued by the Dipartimento di Lingue e Civiltà dell' Europa Centro-Orientale at the University of Udine.⁵

The *Iscrizioni novgorodiane* contains altogether 90 birch bark letters of which 7 have been excavated at Staraja Russa. The birch bark letters analysed in the monograph have been selected out of the complete corpus which now numbers more than 900 letters, on the basis of their textual integrity, i.e. that each individual letter represents a text, not merely a fragment. The 90 birch bark letters selected are further divided into two chronological sections, one section comprising the letters dated to the 11th–beginning of the 13th centuries, the other section comprising those ascribed to the period from the middle of the 13th to the 15th centuries.

The letters chosen are presented in two variants. First a presentation is given which is a mere reproduction of the way the texts appear in the various volumes of the *Новгородские грамоты на бересте*,⁶ but with word-division. Then the texts are presented a second time with inserted punctuation. It is hard to see what is really gained from this kind of double presentation. When the texts have been analysed with regard to word-division, the punctuation is a less intriguing issue. If a double or two-step presentation should have had any purpose, the first

step should have been a reproduction of the text in *scripta continua* as it occurs in the *нрорисъ* reproduced in the above-mentioned books, i.e. a faithful facsimile of the text as it appears on the birch bark itself. The second step, consequently, would then be to analyse the text in terms of dividing it into words and propose proper punctuation.

The somewhat superfluous two-step presentation of the texts does not, however, impede the principal aim of the work of Faccani, which is to treat the texts in accordance with established philological traditions. The principal aim pursued by the scholar is, consequently, to establish the texts in terms of letters and words and to provide an interpretation of them in order to bridge the historical gap between the contemporary reader and the mediaeval scribe, to provide an understanding of what the texts refer to in order to reconstruct their meaning. In order to achieve this aim every single of the 90 texts are translated into Italian and accompanied with commentaries in a section which makes up the latter and by far the most important part of the book. As far as it is possible to ascertain, on the other hand, Faccani does not establish the texts in a way which differs from the one made by Zaliznjak in various publications.⁷ In his commentaries on them, however, Faccani is in some cases more elaborate than Zaliznjak and others of his predecessors in the field. In this way Faccani contributes to a scholarly discussion which has been going on since the very first publications of the birch bark letters saw the day of light more than four decades ago. He is undoubtedly able to launch new interpretations of some of the letters, and in the following I shall comment on some of his findings without claiming to present an exhaustive treatment of them all.

Relatively much space is dedicated to birch bark letter number 9, Gostjata's letter, which, as is well known, has attracted a lot of attention earlier, above all linked to the question whether Gostjata is a man or a woman.⁸ Faccani argues strongly for the view that the Gostjata is a woman and with reference to Gasparini's monumental monograph *Il matriarcato slavo*, 'The Slavic Matriarchate' (Gasparini 1973), he is able to provide an interpretation of the letter which lends strong support to this point of view. The most original part of the discussion here is probably linked to the analysis of the phrase **ДОБРОѢ СЪТВОРА** which is claimed to be a reflection of the **ДОБРОѢ ДѢЛА** in Vita Constantini. And it appears convincing to claim that this in its turn is modelled on Greek *καλῶς ποιῶν*, *εὖ/καλῶς ποιεῖν* or *εὖ πράττειν*. But if such an interpretation is to hold true, the dependence of this text on other texts is perhaps greater than previously assumed. The same could also be the case with the participial construction **ИЗБИВЪ РОУКЪ**, 'having beaten the hands', which, although weakly attested, probably means 'having concluded a new marriage contract'. It is therefore difficult to see how this birch bark text as well as others, constitute a literary culture not linked to others, more dominant ones. A similar correspondence between phrases in the birch bark let-

ters and in Greek is claimed by the author to be ascertained in the perhaps most famous of all of them, Anna's letter, 531, where the phrase **БРАТЕ ГОСПОДИНЕ** is considered to correspond to *κὺριε ἀδελφε*, attested in Greek private letters. If this is true, it is worth noting that such literary correspondences occur along with notorious Novgorod dialectal features elsewhere in the same text. In letter 246, the attention is directed to the sentence **ЧЪСТЪНОЕ ДРЪВО ВЪЗЪМЪ**, 'having taken the holy wood', i.e. having sworn by/kissed the cross. This letter, considered to be one of the very oldest found, from the 11th century, contains reflexes of Christian culture in terms of kissing the cross, *per osculationem crucis* or *secundum osculationem crucis*. The fact that the word for the wood is rendered in its Church Slavic form for wood or tree **ДРЪВО** rather than in the East Slavic form **ДЕРЕВО** indicates that even the very earliest of the birch bark letters came into being under a certain influence of Church Slavic, being the channel which established links between the cultural heritage of the Greek and Latin world and the northernmost Slavic periphery in the first centuries of the last millennium (cf. Picchio 1979–1980, 653).

One of the topics discussed in the interpretations of the texts is the meaning of the word **ВЕЖНИКИ**, attested in two different letters, 550 and 664, respectively, **ВЪЖНИКИ ТВОРАТЕСА ВЪДАВОШЕ СОВЪСЛАВОУ ЦЕТЪРИ ГРИВНЕ**, 'the *vežniki* pretend having given Sobyslav four grivnas', and **ВЕЛИТЬ ВЪЗАТИ У ВЕЖНИКЪ**, 'orders to take from the *vežniki*'. Faccani translates this word as 'uomini delle tende', 'people of the tents', i.e. the Laplanders. If this is to be accepted, we would here have to do with an hitherto unknown designation of the Laplanders, the Saami people of Northern Scandinavia and the Kola peninsula, a people which is known to have dwelled far to the southeast in earlier times, including the Novgorod area.

The word **ВЕЖНИКИ** was ascertained for the first time in 550, excavated in the period 1977–1983. In the first publication of the letter (Янин, Зализняк 1986, 23–24) a connection with **ВЕЖА**, 'tent', is not considered likely. It appeared more likely to consider **ВЕЖНИКИ** as derived from a designation of a village, although no appropriate village was identified. Then the same word turns up in 664, excavated in the period 1983–1986. In the publication of this letter, however, the link to **ВЕЖА**, is now considered probable (Янин, Зализняк 1993, 55). It is further suggested that the **ВЕЖНИКИ** are not settled taxpayers, i.e. nomads with a negative reputation. In the latest publication of these letters (Зализняк 1995, 271), it is plainly stated that the literal meaning of **ВЕЖНИКИ** are 'those living in tents', and probably designating Laplanders or Karelians. No further arguments are adduced for this point of view. As the book of Faccani was published in the same year as Zaliznjak's, it is hard to decide who first suggested the idea that the **ВЕЖНИКИ** might be a designation of the Laplanders. There is no doubt, however, that Faccani has provided a well-founded argumentation for this interpretation of the word. As

far as I am able to ascertain, the interpretation of Faccani is founded on solid arguments and based on evidence provided by a number of dictionaries, historical ones as well as regional ones. Most important among these is that of Podvysockij where the *вежа* (Подвысоцкій 1885, 27) is described in detail as one of the dwellings of the Saami in summertime on the Kola peninsula. Faccani does not, however, note that the word is not listed in Kulikovskij's dictionary of the dialect of the more southern Olonec area (Куликовскій 1898), a fact which deserves attention when assuming that it must have spread from the south in a northern direction. But in support of Faccani's interpretation it should be pointed out that the word has got an entry in the dictionary of the dialect of the Pomors of the Kola peninsula in obvious accordance with the recording of Podvysockij, cf. *вежа*: 1. 'Жилище саамов из жердей, покрытое хворостом и дерном или шкурами', 2. 'Землянка рыбаков' (Меркурьев 1979, 26). From a lingvogeographic point of view it is further interesting to note that the word with the latter meaning is still recorded in the Novgorod area, cf. НОС 1992, 110, *вежа*: 'шалаш, покрытый хворостом и мхом', while no similar entry is found in the Pskov area, cf. ПОСЗ, 63, where the *вежа* is attested in mediaeval sources as 'башня, высокая постройка'.

In his overall textual interpretation of the birch bark texts, Faccani pays ample attention to the historical background for several of them. The very early, one-line text of 590, *ЛИТВА ВЪСТАЛА НА КОРЪЛОУ*, 'the Lithuanians started to wage war on the carelians' is consequently commented on in order to provide the appropriate historical background and to link this circumstance with information contained in other contemporary sources. In the first centuries of the last millennium, Rus' was often described as an other place than the Novgorod lands, i.e. referring to the Kiev lands. This is poorly reflected in the BBL. In fact the word *роуць* is ascertained in just 105 where it obviously refers to a place other than the Novgorod area.

The overall attention of Faccani is directed towards interpretation of the texts, their background and context, lexicon and phraseology. Very little is said about syntax, morphology or phonology. When it comes to syntax, however, at least two interesting observations are made. It is pointed out that the oldest example with *infinitivum cum nominativum* is attested in a 12th century birch bark letter from Staraja Russa (number 10), *ВОДА ПИТИ*, at least a century earlier than previously attested (Filin 1972, 477).⁹ In another case Faccani claims to have ascertained a passive clause where the agens is made up by the preposition *и* plus gen., cf. 607 which consists just of one line: *ЖИЗНОВОУДЕ ПОГОУБЛЕНЕ ОУ СЫЧЕВИЦЬ*, 'žiznobud was killed by the syčevics'. When this letter was first published in 1986, it was not interpreted as containing a passive construction. It was claimed that *оу сычевиць* indicated the place where or the family in which *жизновоуде* had been killed (Янин, Зализняк 1986, 71). In the latest publication of the

letter by Zaliznjak, the presence of a passive construction is plainly stated with no reference to Faccani and neither Faccani refers in his book to Zaliznjak. For a reviewer it therefore appears appropriate to wonder whether Faccani and Zaliznjak have reached the same conclusions independently of each other in this case as well as in the case of the **ВЕЖНИКИ**.

In his treatment Faccani addresses morphological and phonological issues only randomly. That might also provide the explanation for the author's complete negligence of the scholarly discussions which the research on the BBL has triggered. The book's preface as well as the list of references conveys the impression that the author is only aware of the Zaliznjak-school of research. No reference is made neither in the commentaries, nor in the list of references to scholars who do not fully share the approach of the Zaliznjak-school of berestology. This point is amply exemplified by the discussion of birch bark letter 130 where it is plainly stated with reference to the *hapax legomenon* **ХЪРН**, that 'Andrej Zaliznjak has proved in an extremely persuasive manner that we are facing a variant of *sěrbъ* with the meaning "grey cloth" (...) "bez efekta vtoroj palatalizacii"'.¹⁰ Faccani is apparently ignorant of the views of other scholars than Zaliznjak or he finds them to insignificant to be mentioned. This is rather conspicuous as a most convincing alternative interpretation of this lexeme was presented a year before the publication of Faccani's book by A.B. Strachov where it is proposed that the lexeme is simply a Germanic loan, *gero, kero*, meaning cloth (Strachov 1994, 298), even listed in the dictionary of Sparwenfeld as *kirъ/kirь*, as *χύΔεε κύκηο, pannus vilis*. An alternative interpretation has also been proposed by myself (Bjørnflaten 1990, 323, Bjørnflaten 1997, 15), that the initial /ch/ arose from /š/ which in its turn was the outcome of *šokan'e* operating above all in the Pskov area and amply attested in mediaeval texts.¹¹ This interpretation of mine was sought substantiated with reference to the form **ХОВ** attested by Fenne (1607) and derived from **ШОВ**, i.e. **ХОВ** < **ШОВ** as an apparant parallel to **ХЪРН** < **СЪРН**.

This criticism pertains, however, to points of lesser importance in the book of Faccani, while it could be considered more serious that the scholar chooses to leave unmentioned the controversy which the highly creative research of Zaliznjak and others has yielded. The main object of the book has been to provide coherent textual interpretation of 90 birch bark letters. This aim has been achieved and it is undoubtedly an accomplishment to have translated all these texts into Italian and thereby providing the most extensive translations of the birch bark letters into any contemporary language other than Russian. The birch bark letters exist now not merely in Russian, but also in Italian which means that scholars from other fields without any knowledge of Russian may gain access to glimpses of life as it unfolded in Lord Novgorod the Great.

NOTES

- ¹ Among the more recent summings-up, cf. Sedov 1999, 253–279.
² Cf. among recent criticism Шустер-Шевц 1998, Birnbaum 1999, above all pp. 130–138.
³ In addition to the monograph to be reviewed here, these are: Paleogr. 1955, Kuraszkiewicz 1957, Жуковская 1959, Melin 1966, Черепнин 1969, Янин 1979, Зализняк 1995, Vermeer 1996, Янин 1998.
⁴ Cf. the impressive volume edited by Bercoff et al. 1994.
⁵ The year of the publication is unfortunately not indicated in the title pages, but as the the preface is dated to may 1995, the publication must be assumed to have taken place not long after that date.
⁶ For the bibliographic details, cf. Зализняк (1998, 265–266).
⁷ Cf. above all Зализняк 1995.
⁸ Cf. Jakobson 1952; Kuraszkiewicz 1981, 181.
⁹ Cf. further Timberlake (1974, 5) on this issue.
¹⁰ ‘... Andrej Zaliznjak ha dimonstrato, quando mai persuasiva, che ci troviamo dinanzi a una variante di chěri, col valore di “panno grigio” (...), “bez ěffekta vtoroj palatalizacii” (Faccani 1985, 158–159).
¹¹ Also supported by Sjøberg 1990, 424.

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