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Social Networks and Affective Relationships in Medieval Novgorod based on Birchbark Letters, ca. 1100-1300

This paper examines surviving birchbark letters from Novgorod the Great (Velikii Novgorod, northwest Russia), ca. 1100–1300, using three complimentary methodological approaches: Social Network Analysis, qualitative historical research, and linguistic analysis of so-called “affective language” (language related to moods, emotions, and feelings). It argues that birchbark letters, when placed in the wider contexts of communicative social networks and the cultural usage of diminutives, epistolary formulas, and other written forms of affective language, help to uncover and aid historians in better understanding interpersonal relationships and contact between individuals and groups in medieval Novgorod. Through this multidisciplinary approach, longstanding ideas about social hierarchy in medieval Novgorod can be tentatively reappraised. Individual letter collections – for instance, the collection of a twelfth century boyar named Petr Mikhalkovich – show that “affectionate” personal relationships permeated social divides and crossed space from urban to rural areas and that birchbark letter communication networks bridged preconceived “gaps” between boyars, princes, merchants, women, and tributary villagers in Novgorodian society.