

Birch bark

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Birch bark or **birchbark** is the bark of several Eurasian and North American birch trees of the genus *Betula*.

The strong and water-resistant cardboard-like bark can be easily cut, bent, and sewn, which made it a valuable building, crafting, and writing material, since pre-historic times. Even today birch bark remains a popular type of wood for various handicrafts and arts.

Birch bark also contains substances of medicinal and chemical interest. Some of those products (such as betulin) also have fungicidal properties that help preserve bark artifacts, as well as food preserved in bark containers.

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Collection and storage

Removing birch bark from live trees is harmful to tree health and should be avoided. Instead, it can be removed fairly easily from the trunk or branches of dead wood, by cutting a slit lengthwise through the bark and pulling or prying it away from the wood. The best time for collection is spring or early summer, as the bark is of better quality and most easily removed.

Removing the outer (light) layer of bark from the trunk of a living tree may not kill it, but probably weakens it and makes it more prone to infections. Removal of the inner (dark) layer, the phloem, kills the tree by preventing the flow of sap to the roots.

To prevent it from rolling up during storage, the bark should be spread open and kept pressed flat.

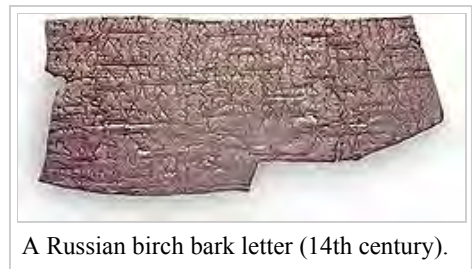
Working

Birch bark can be cut with a sharp knife, and worked like cardboard. For sharp bending, the fold should be scored (scratched) first with a blunt stylus.

Fresh bark can be worked as is; bark that has dried up (before or after collection) should be softened by steaming, by soaking in warm water, or over a fire.



A man with a hat made from birch bark in Hankasalmi, Central Finland



A Russian birch bark letter (14th century).



Contemporary quillwork design on birch bark, by Ferdie Goode

Uses

Birch bark was a valuable construction material in any part of the world where birch trees were available. Containers like wrappings, bags, baskets, boxes, or quivers were made by most societies well before pottery was invented. Other uses include:

- In various Asian countries (including Siberia) birch bark was used to make storage boxes, paper, tinder, canoes, roof coverings, tents, and waterproof covering for composite bows, such as the Mongol bow, the Chinese bow, Korean bow, Turkish bows, Assyrian bow, the Perso-Parthian bow....etc. It is still being used. More than one variety of birch is used.
- In North America, the native population used birch bark for canoes,^[1] wigwams, scrolls, ritual art (birch bark biting), maps (including the oldest maps of North America^[2]), torches, fans, musical instruments, clothing, and more.
- In Scandinavia and Finland, it was used as the substratum of sod roofs and birch-bark roofs, for making boxes, casks and buckets, fishing implements, and shoes (as used by the Egtved Girl).
- In Russia, many birch bark manuscripts have survived from the Middle Ages.
- Birch bark knife handles are popular tools to be made currently.
- In India, birch-bark, along with dried palm leaves, replaced parchment as the primary writing medium. The oldest known Buddhist manuscripts (some of the Gandharan Buddhist Texts), from Afghanistan, were written on birch bark.

Birch bark also makes an outstanding tinder, as the inner layers will stay dry even through heavy rainstorms. To render birch bark useless as tinder, it must be soaked for an extended period of time.

See also

- Birch bark manuscript
- Mazinibaganjigan (Ojibwa birch bark decorative designs)
- Wiigwaasabak (Ojibwa birch bark scrolls)
- "Wiigwaas" entry in Wiktionary

References

1. Tom Vennum, Charles Weber, Earl Nyholm (Director) (1999). *Earl's Canoe: A Traditional Ojibwe Craft*. Smithsonian Center for Folklife Programs and Cultural Studies. Retrieved 2012-12-03.
2. Hayes, Derek. *Historical Atlas of Canada: Canada's History Illustrated with Original Maps*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre Ltd, 2002. p. 152.



Birchbark box with lid and bottom of birch wood



Finnish fishing net weights made out of birch bark and stones



North American birchbark canoe



Birchbark knife handle

- *The Algonquin Birchbark Canoe* (<https://web.archive.org/web/20050213220655/http://www.woodencanoe.net:80/shop/book/thealgonquin.html>), by David Gidmark.

Further reading

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- Adney, Edwin Tappan and Howard Chapelle, *Bark Canoes and Skin Boats of North America*, Skyhorse Publishing, Inc., 2007, 2014.
- Jennings, John, *Bark Canoes: The Art and Obsession of Tappan Adney*, Firefly Books Ltd., 2004.
- Behne, C. Ted, editor, *The Travel Journals of Tappan Adney, 1887-1890*, Estate of Tappan Adney, 2010.
- Goode, F.W., *Ojibwe Birch Bark Canoes: Anishinaabe Wigwassi-Jiimaan*, Beaver Bark Canoes, 2012.



Winter bark etching on canoe

External links

- Birchbark articles (<http://www.nativetech.org/brchbark/>) from the *NativeTech* site.
- Birch and Birch Bark (http://nrd.kbic-nsn.gov/sites/default/files/GatheringBirchandBirchBark_0.pdf), an article by John Zasada at a University of Minnesota site.
- Birch Bark Canoe (<http://www.algonquinsofpikwakanagan.com/Culture%20birch%20bark%20canoe%202004.htm>) page on the site of the Algonquins of Pikwāganagan.
- César's Bark Canoe (http://www.nfb.ca/film/Cesars_Bark_Canoe/)—Watch a documentary on how to build a Birch bark canoe
- Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions Digital Image Collection (<http://www.marquette.edu/library/archives/Mss/BCIM/BCIM-SC1.shtml>) at Marquette University; keyword: birch bark.
- Wiigwaasi-Jiimaan: These Canoes Carry Culture (<https://vimeo.com/145946701>)—Short documentary featuring the building of an Anishinaabe-Ojibwe birchbark canoe in Wisconsin.



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