

# DEFINITELY PERFECT

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# WHAT TO GIVE AS WEDDING GIFTS IN MEDIEVAL NOVGOROD?

ON BIRCHBARK DOCUMENT NOS. 261-264

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## 1 Introduction

The corpus of birchbark documents from medieval Novgorod and other cities in Rus' is usually known to a larger audience because of the hundreds of private letters it comprises. They give us fascinating glimpses into everyday life and interpersonal communication in a vibrant commercial center strategically located on the major trade routes between Scandinavia and Byzantium ('From the Varangians to the Greeks'), and Western Europe and the East. Most of the scholarly literature is dedicated to this particular text type, which constitutes more than half of the corpus of birchbark documents.

The present article deals with a second category represented on birchbark,<sup>1</sup> viz. records which concern various financial, commercial and household affairs. Many of these birchbarks consist of lists of names in combination with goods or units of currency. This is the case with document nos. 261-264 (N261-N264, where 'N' stands for Novgorod), which is the object of our investigation (see Section 2).

We will review the current interpretation of the text (Section 3) and discuss the specific meaning of two lexemes: *čator* (Section 4) and *bljudo* (Section 5). In the latter case, evidence from two additional Western sources of knowledge (Johan Danckaert 1615, and Tönnies Fenne 1607) will be adduced to further clarify the practical nature of the text.

## 2 Text and comments

N261-N264 consists of four fragments which were found sixty years ago, in 1957, during excavations at the Nerev site (*Usad'ba E*), on the Sophia Side of the city,

north of the Kremlin. The pieces of birchbark, all written in the same handwriting, are the remains of a bigger document, which is dated stratigraphically between the 1370s and 1390s, whereas extra-stratigraphical evidence places it between the 1340s and the 1370s, preferably not earlier than the 1360s.<sup>2</sup>

N261-N264 was first published in 1963 (*NGB* 5, 1963: 88-91, including drawings). Additional corrections and comments can be found in *NGB* 8 (1986: 179-180, 198-199). The English translation below is based on the publication of the document in *DND* (2004: 608-611).

N264: beginning of the document

- (1) From Fedor Sinofontov<sup>3</sup> 4 dishes, goatskin.<sup>4</sup>
- (2) From the *Porěčane* (?)<sup>5</sup>...
- (3) From Syp's wife<sup>6</sup> 5 (dishes), goatskin.
- (4) From Onanija Kurickij<sup>7</sup> 4 (dishes), ...

N263: one of the remaining parts in the middle of the document

- (5) From Gjurgij ...
- (6) From Vasilij ...
- (7) From ...-priest 3 (dishes), felt of goat's hair.<sup>8</sup>
- (8) From Jakun's wife, Foma's daughter-in-law, 3 (dishes).
- (9) From Terentij Koj<sup>9</sup> 5 (dishes), a cut ...
- (10) From ... Ofonosov<sup>10</sup> 2 (dishes), goatskin.
- (11) From Flar' Kočankov 5 (dishes), a cut of blue cloth.<sup>11</sup>
- (12) From Boris Pjanteleev ...
- (13) From Pavel Ivanov 3 (dishes), goatskin.
- (14) From *Ondr*... ...

N261: the second remaining part in the middle

- (15) From Filofa's wife a dish.
- (16) From Lar'jan<sup>12</sup> ...
- (17) From ... ..*slavova* 3 (dishes), goatskin.
- (18) From Savva Timoškin<sup>13</sup> 3 (dishes).

- (19) From *O...* ...  
 (20) From ... Boguslavov 3 (dishes), ...

N262: end of the document

- (21) From ... ..., goatskin.  
 (22) From Gorislavlič ...  
 (23) From ... 6 (dishes), a shirt made of *čator*.  
 (24) From Flar'...  
 (25) From ... ..., a cut of green cloth.<sup>14</sup>  
 (26) From Ratslav-*podvojskij*<sup>15</sup> ...  
 (27) From Maksim Maškov 5 (dishes), goatskin.

### 3 Interpretation of the text

In the first edition of N261-N264, the list of names and goods was interpreted as specific purchases of the author from a group of small manufacturers (*NGB* 5, 1963: 90). The word for 'dish' (*bljudo*) was considered to be some sort of measurement unit for goatskin (*timъ*): "Не совсем понятно, почему тим измеряется блюдами. Возможно, что так именовались сосуды для дубления" (*idem*, 91). However, Burov (1978) put forward a far more plausible and coherent explanation of the meaning of the list, which was later adopted by Janin (1998: 159-160)<sup>16</sup> and *DND*, on which the translation above is based.

According to Burov, the many patronymics which occur in the list show that we are dealing with a group of individuals from the upper strata of society: "В ту эпоху отчество было наиболее характерно для лиц знатного происхождения" (1978: 87; see also *DND* 2004: 610). Second, Burov points out that 'from' is rendered by the preposition *otъ* throughout the document, in contrast with the many instances of *y* 'from' in other birchbark lists of names that occur in combination with goods or money. In the latter case, it is obvious that the meaning is 'to take from' in terms of debts, rent, tribute, etc. The preposition *otъ*, however, presupposes a voluntary act of giving, 'to receive from' in terms of donations of gifts: "В нашем понимании формула подобного типа выражает дарственность: дарят дорогую кожу, одежду, блюда, войлочные ковры. Все

берется на учет рачительным хозяином” (Burov 1978: 87). Third, Burov refers to an observation made by Sigismund von Herberstein in his *Rerum Moscoviticarum Commentarii* from the mid-sixteenth century to corroborate his thesis that the list should be understood as a memorandum of wedding gifts received from the esteemed invitees to the ceremony. Herberstein’s comments will be quoted and discussed in Section 5.

*DND* (2004: 609) further elaborates on Burov’s interpretation of N261-N264. The word *bljudo* ‘dish’ occurs only twice in the list, viz. at the beginning of N264, after the numeral 4, and in the beginning of N261, where we find the only instance of *bljudo* used in the singular (see entries (1) and (15) above). *DND* argues that *bljudo* is implied after all numerals in the list and should be disconnected from other gifts that are enumerated after the word. Thus, in contrast to *NGB* 5 (1963: 91), *bljudo* cannot be explained as a measurement unit for goatskin: “Последующее изучение документа постепенно приводило к освобождению от такой иллюзии” (*DND* 2004: 610; cf. Čerepnin 1969: 287). Apparently, all guests had to give at least one or more dishes, which should be understood as dishware, as Čerepnin explicitly notes (“посула”, idem; cf. *SDRJa* 1988: 241). In addition, cloth and other fabrics could be donated, but not necessarily, as in the case of Jakun’s wife (three dishes only, nothing else), Filofa’s wife (one dish), and Savva Timoškin (three dishes); see entries (8), (15), and (18) above (cf. *DND* 2004: 609).

#### 4 On *čator*

The exact meaning of *čator* in entry (23) (*соръцица цатрова*, with *c-* instead of *č-* due to *cokan’è*) is unclear: “чаторвая рубаха (т. е. из ткани, называемой *чаторь*, см. Срезн[евский])” (idem). The reference provided in *NGB* 5 (1963: 89) to a Hanseatic document from around 1300, where we read ... *и дали ему скорлата портъ жо чаторь* (Napiersky 1868: 27; cf. Sreznevskij 1912: 1483, s.v. *чаторь*, with a question mark regarding its meaning) remains inconclusive.

Most likely, *čator* is an old Turkic loanword (attested as *čadyr*, *šatyr*, *šadyr*, *sadyr* in different languages), which is related to Persian *čatr* and Sanskrit *chattra* ‘parasol’ (a derivation from the verbal root *chad-* ‘to cover’). It is otherwise well

known in Slavic as *шамѣр* (Russian), *шаторъ, шатъръ* (Old Russian), *шатър* (Bulgarian), *szatr, szatra* (Polish), etc., which usually means ‘tent, screen’ (Fasmer 1986-87 IV: 413). A variant of the same origin is Russian *чадра* ‘chador’, i.e. a Persian veil (idem, 311).

Although all these words refer to objects rather than the type of cloth of which they are made, a semantic shift in the case of *соръцица цатрова* is quite conceivable: ‘a shirt made of cloth similar to a *čator*’ or ‘a shirt that is similar to a *čator* in shape’, covering a larger part of the body and perhaps going down below the ankles. This conjecture can be corroborated by cognates like Azerbaijani *čadyra*, which according to Fasmer (idem) means ‘MITKAЛЬ’, i.e. ‘calico; chiffon’.<sup>17</sup>

## 5 On *bljudo*

### 5.1 Herberstein and Danckaert on wedding gifts

As mentioned above, Burov (1978: 87) adduced evidence from Herberstein’s *Rerum Moscoviticarum Commentarii*, where we find a comment on the procedure of giving, listing, examining, sending back or compensating wedding gifts. The passage quoted by Burov (on the basis of a Russian edition from the beginning of the previous century; Gerberštejn 1908: 71-72)<sup>18</sup> is given below in the English translation of Major (1851: 92).<sup>19</sup> Burov (1978: 87) explicitly refers to passage (2), where it says that the groom “carefully marked” the presents of the invitees to the wedding. Our document N261-N264 seems to be the tangible proof that such a procedure existed in former times.

In addition to Herberstein’s comments on wedding gifts, I will provide a second account of the procedure by another foreigner, namely the Dutchman Johan (Jan) Danckaert, who in 1615 published the first description of Russia in Dutch: *Beschryvinge van Moscovien ofte Ruslant ...* (‘Description of Muscovy or Russia ...’). Danckaert was clearly familiar with Herberstein’s popular and widely-spread *Commentarii* (cf. Piso 1989, Nozdrin 2016: 198), as can be deduced from his text below, which follows Herberstein’s commentary in many details. However, Danckaert also included his own observations that he must have noted down during his stay in Russia (mainly Novgorod), probably between 1609 and 1614, when he served in the Swedish army (Piso 1989: 39, Nozdrin 2016: 203-

205).<sup>20</sup> His personal additions to Herberstein's account are relevant for the discussion in the next subsection.

Herberstein 1556/1557	Danckaert 1615
(1) Horses, dresses, weapons, cattle, servants, and the like, are generally given as dowry.	Money, horses, oxen, cows, pearls, clothing and estates are generally given as a dowry. <sup>21</sup>
(2) Those who are invited to the wedding, seldom offer money, but send presents to the bride, each of which is carefully marked and put away by the bridegroom.	Those who are invited to the wedding, also have to bring some gifts or loan gifts, which is sometimes also money, but usually clothing and other household goods, which the bridegroom receives, puts on record, and stows in a chest or box. <sup>22</sup>
(3) When the marriage is over, he again arranges them in order, and examines them, and sends such of them as please him, and as he thinks likely to be of use to him, to the market, and orders them to be valued by the appraisers; he then sends back all the other things to their respective donors, with an expression of thanks.	And after the wedding he takes them out again, examines them, and if there is something that pleases him or may be of use to him, he then sends it to the market to have its value estimated; the rest he sends back, with an expression of thanks to the donors. <sup>23</sup>
(4) He makes compensation in the course of the following year, either in money or in something else of equal value, for those things which he has kept.	For those things which he keeps, he pays within a year, either with money or other goods. <sup>24</sup>

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|---|---|
| <p>(5) Moreover, if any one make out his gift to be of greater value, the bridegroom then sends back immediately to the sworn appraisers and compels the party to stand by their valuation.</p> | <p>And if anyone estimates his gifts higher than appraised on the market, the bridegroom then goes back to the appraisers and asks them again if the same good is of more value; and if they answer no, then he is not bound to give more, notwithstanding the fact that the other estimated it much higher.<sup>25</sup></p> |
| <p>(6) Also, if the bridegroom should not make compensation when a year has elapsed, or restore the accepted gift, then he is bound to return double.</p>                                       | <p>And, if the bridegroom should not pay within a year, or restore the gifts without damage, then he is bound to pay for it double.<sup>26</sup></p>  |
| <p>(7) Finally, if he should neglect to send any one's gift to be valued by the sworn appraisers, he is compelled to repay according to the will and decision of the party who gave it.</p>     | <p>(No parallel text)</p>   |

## 5.2 What to do with dozens of dishes?

All guests mentioned in N261-N264 were obviously required to donate one or more pieces of dishware (*bljudo*). Dishware must have been of main importance as a wedding gift but is mentioned neither by Herberstein nor Danckaert. In principle, this should not be an obstacle to question the specific nature of the gift because the remarks made by Herberstein and Danckaert are at least some two hundred years later than the attested record on birchbark. Moreover, it can be doubted that their information is based on accurate firsthand observations of practical procedures during a wedding ceremony (cf. Xoroškevič 2008 II: 390-391).

However, the birchbark document itself casts some doubt on the specific type of gift that is named *bljudo*. The number of dishes mentioned explicitly is fifty-five.



These were given by fifteen invitees, which means between three and four dishes per person. If we assume the same average for the remaining twelve entries in the list, where we do not find a specific number due to lacunae, the total sum of dishes amounts to one hundred or so. This remarkable figure seems quite unrealistic and calls the meaning of *bljudo* as a simple piece of dishware into question. In this regard, I would like to return to passage (2) quoted in the previous subsection. In addition to Herberstein's observation that the groom carefully noted down the presents, Danckaert adds that he then put them away "in a chest or box" (*in een coffer oft kiste*), which he opens after the wedding for further inspection. The mention of a chest or a box gives rise to the hypothesis that *bljudo* may have had a wider semantic connotation and perhaps should be understood as a 'container' of goods.

This conjecture may be supported by Tönnies Fenne's 1607 translation of *блѹда* / *blüda* as 'vahtt' (Hendriks and Schaecken 2008: 97), which in Middle Low German basically means 'barrel, cask, vessel', with the secondary meaning of 'dish' (cf. Schiller-Lübben 1880: 213-214, s.v. *vat* "Faß, Gefäß"; "Schübel (aus der man ißt)"). The Russian word *блѹда* / *blüda* occurs in a list of kitchen equipment, including other containers like 'kettle' (*хотоль* / *kottoll* 'ketell'), 'mug' (*хруска* / *kruska* 'kanne'), and 'pot' (*триносок* / *trinoszok* 'dutsch pott'; *горсок* / *gorsok* 'rusch pott'). Elsewhere, Fenne uses the same German word to render *бочька* / *botzka* in *сали бочька* / *sali botzka* 'tallich vatt', i.e. 'barrel for tallow' (Hendriks and Schaecken 2008: 117).

The comments made by Danckaert and Fenne may indicate that the wedding gifts enumerated in N261-N264 did not include dozens of dishes that were somehow obligatory, but (*bljudo*-shaped) containers with different goods. The scribe of the birchbark document – perhaps the groom himself – marked the number of containers per person as well as the pieces of cloth and other fabrics, which may have been additional gifts or part of the goods in the containers that deserved special mention (cf. passages (1) and (2) of Herberstein's and Danckaert's observations, who specifically refer to 'dresses' and 'clothing').

## Notes

- 1 See *DND* (2004: 20).
- 2 Cf. *NGB* 6 (1963: 7), *NGB* 10 (2000: 147; dated '1360-1380'), *DND* (2004: 608).
- 3 Fedor Sinofontov might be the son of Sinofont, who is the author of N178 (*DND* 2004: 590-591, 611).
- 4 'Goatskin' is the translation of *tima* "т.с. сафьян (выделанная козловая кожа)" (*DND* 2004: 609); see also *NGB* 8 (1986: 198), with reference to *tim* and *timj krasnji* in Tönnies Fenne 1607 (see Hendriks and Schaeken 2008: 112).
- 5 The reconstructed form *Porčane* (based on the reading *pore[ca]*... in the document) might refer to the inhabitants of an unidentified village called *Porč'e* or people who lived along the banks of a certain river (Vasil'ev 2005: 309).
- 6 Considering the rare occurrence of the name *Syp*, we might be dealing with the widow of Ivan Syp, who is mentioned in the First Novgorod Chronicle under the year 1329 when he was murdered in Jur'ev. N261-N264 is some forty years older, which would make Ivan's wife around sixty or seventy at the time the document was written (*DND* 2004: 611).
- 7 Onanija Kurickij (*Kuričevskij*) occurs in the First Novgorod Chronicle under the year 1345; he may have been around fifty-five or sixty when N261-N264 was compiled (*DND* 2004: 610).
- 8 In the Russian translation: "полстка (т. е. коврик, кошма, валяный полог) из козьего пуха" (*DND* 2004: 609).
- 9 Apparently, *Koj* is a nickname which can be connected with Proto-Slavic \**kojiti* 'to calm, to silence'; cf. Russian *почить, покой*, etc., as well as the personal names *Koj* in Old Czech, *Koya* in Old Polish, *Kojić* in Serbian, *Койка* in Bulgarian, etc. (Vasil'ev 2005: 144).
- 10 This individual might be identified as the son of Ofonos Onciforovič, who is the addressee of N178; cf. note 3 above (*DND* 2004: 590-591, 611).
- 11 Cf. *DND* (2004: 609): "портище голубине – отрез (а именно, количество, потребное на один кафтан) голубой ткани" (see also *NGB* 8, 1986: 179-180).
- 12 In principle, this Lar'jan might also be the author of N91, who carries the same name (*DND* 2004: 593, 611).
- 13 Savva Timoškín might be related to Grigorij Timoškín, who figures in N260 (*DND* 2004: 604-605, 611; see also Burov 1978: 87).
- 14 Cf. *DND* (2004: 609): "портище зелени – отрез зеленой ткани" (see also *NGB* 8, 1986: 179-180, and note 11 above).
- 15 A *podvojskij* is a specific administrative official (*DND* 2004: 472). Ratslav may be related to O Aleksandr Ratslavov in N260 (cf. note 13 above); see also the occurrence of Radoslav in N50 (idem, 604-605, 611, 615-616).
- 16 Janin (1998) refers to the third edition of *Ja poslal tebe berestu ...* In previous editions (1965, 1975), Janin argued that the list represented tribute that had to be paid in kind. This hypothesis did not convince Čerepnin (1969: 288) and Burov (1978), for good reasons.
- 17 I would like to thank Sasha Lubotsky and Gulnaz Sibgatullina, Leiden University, for their helpful comments on this particular issue.
- 18 See now Xoroškevič (2008 I: 231, 233, II: 390-391).
- 19 For the edition of the Latin version of 1556 and Herberstein's own German translation of 1557, see Kämpfer et al. (2007). The passage quoted above can be found in the chapter *Ratio contrabendi matrimonium / Vom Ehestand* (idem, 169-175), more specifically pp. 170-171 (the Latin text starts at line 17 on p. 170 and ends at line 13 on p. 171; the German version runs from line 52 on p. 170 until line 49 on the following page). The Latin and German texts are also included in Xoroškevič (2008 I).

20 The passage in Danckaert quoted along with Herberstein's text can be found in chapter 14 of Part II: *Van haer bouwelijck, ende hoe zy daer in leven* (pp. 51-53), more specifically pp. 52-53. – On Danckaert see also Kovalenko (2007) and especially Nozdrin (2016), with further references. Except for Piso (1989), investigations regarding Danckaert by Dutch scholars are scarce (see for instance short comments in Driessen 1986: 51-53, 55, 59, Wijnsroks 2003: 293, and Blom and Bas-Backer 2014: 21-22).

21 “De houwelijcksche giften zijn ghemeynlijck Gelt / Peerden / Ossen / Coeyen / Peerlen / Cleederen / ende Landt-goederen.”

22 “De gheene die te bruyloft comen / moeten oock eenighe giften / ofte leen-goederen mede brengen / ’twelck oock somtijts is gelt / maer meest cleederen ende andere meubelen / de welke den Bruydegom ontfanghen ende by memorie ghestelt hebbende / sluyt de selve in een coffer oft kiste /”.

23 “ende nae de bruyloft haelt hy die weder te voorschijn / overzietse / ende sooder yets onder is dat hem behaecht ofte te nut soude moghen wesen / dat sent hy op de Merckt / ende laet estimeren hoe veel het weerdich is / de reste sent hy wederom / doende bedancken de gheene die hem dat ghebrocht hadden;”.

24 “’t gheene hy behoudt betaelt hy binnen ’sjaers met gelt oft andere waren;”.

25 “Ende indien yemant sijne giften hoogher estimeerde / als die op de Merckt ghewaerdeert waren / soo gaet den Bruydegom wederomme by de gheene die de estimatie ghedaen hadden / ende vraecht haer noch cenmael oft t’selve goet meer waardich is / ende soo sy antwoorden neen / soo en is hy niet ghehouden meer daer voor te gheven / niet teghenstaende den anderen ’tselve veel hoogher estimeerde;”.

26 “Ende soo verre den Bruydegom binnen het jaer niet en betaelt / ofte de giften onbeschadicht wederomme sent / soo is hy ghehouden de selve dobbel te betalen;”.

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